

October 1993

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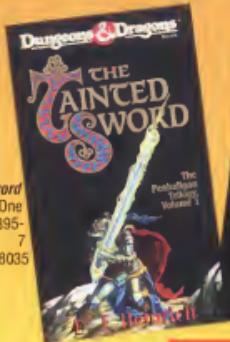
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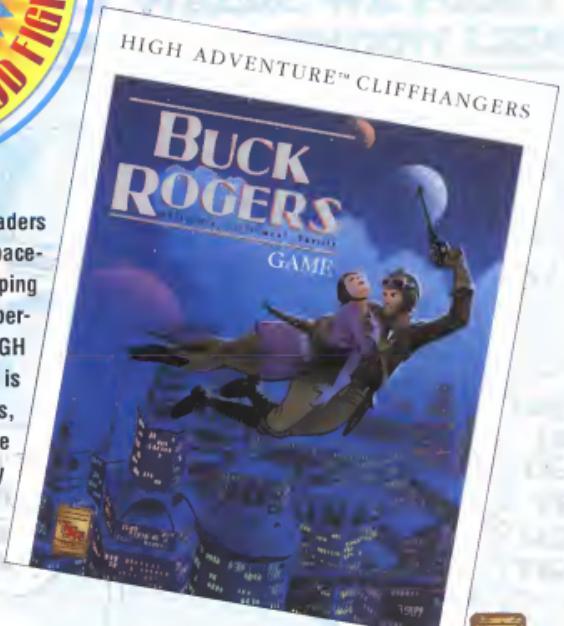
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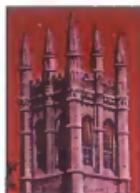


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AMAZING® Stories [ISSN 1058-0751] is published monthly by TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

Subscriptions: The standard price of a subscription is \$30 for 12 issues [one year] sent to U.S. or Canadian addresses. For subscriptions sent to all other countries, the rates are \$50 surface mail or \$90 for air mail. **Note:** All subscriptions must be paid in advance in U.S. funds only. Prices are subject to change without notice. All subscription orders should be sent to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 5695, Boston MA 02206.

Distribution: The principal distributor of AMAZING Stories in the United States and Canada is Eastern News Distributors, Inc. The magazine is distributed to the book and hobby trade in the United Kingdom by TSR Ltd.

Submissions: AMAZING Stories welcomes unsolicited submissions of fiction manuscripts. Guidelines for fiction writers are available by sending a #10 SASE to the Lake Geneva address. Illustrators and writers of nonfiction should query first and provide samples of published work.

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Second class postage paid at Lake Geneva, Wis., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to TSR, Inc., P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147.

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The Bogus Detector

Kim Mohan

None of us is immune from the influence of memories and preferences, and that's a good thing. The craft of fiction writing wouldn't exist if people weren't able to draw on their experiences, and performing my job would be impossible if my mind couldn't rely on frames of reference to make value judgments.

This is an editor's most valuable resource, more valuable than textbook knowledge of grammar and more important than the recollection of any stories the editor has read prior to the one that's currently on the desk: his portfolio of personal experiences, and his background in the subjects he studied in school or has learned about since.

Especially useful to me are the esoteric subjects that, chances are, I know more about than most of the people who will read the stories I select. When I get a story that deals with, for instance, major league baseball, 1960s rock and roll, or classic automobiles, I'm probably going to be much more capable of making an accurate judgment on that story than any other editor who sees it (assuming that other editors have esoteric specialties different from mine).

In the day-to-day routine of reading and evaluating stories, these special frames of reference don't come into use very often—which is to be expected, since generally writers don't create stories about the same esoteric subjects I'm familiar with. But when I do get a chance to bring some of my special knowledge into

my job, that knowledge often makes the difference between buying a good story and being embarrassed.

Near-future or alternate-history scenarios involving professional sports are one of my fortés, since I used to be a sportswriter and I still keep up with what's going on in the major sports. I know the rules and I know the jargon, so I can tell pretty quickly if I'm seeing the work of a writer who's familiar with his subject matter. When I read about a character who has "struck a single" or "earned three yards" or "fired a free throw," my bogus detector starts to go off. The writer may not be obviously trying to put something over on me, but almost always the end result is the same as if he was: no sale.

Because the vast majority of readers also don't share my esoteric areas of knowledge, I have to be careful even with stories in which the writer does know his subject. If it's necessary for a reader to have an intimate knowledge of sports history or terminology in order to appreciate a story, then I'll send the manuscript back even if it's well written—because I'm afraid I might be one of the few people exposed to the story who can understand it well enough to enjoy it.

The issue you're holding contains a prime example of how one of my frames of reference came into play recently. I liked "Jimi Plays Dead," by Bruce Bethke, as soon as I read it for the first time, because the nucleus of the story (1960s rock and roll) is one of my pet topics. But you don't have

to be an ex-hippie to understand the story; all you really need to know is who Jimi Hendrix was and what the general state of the pop music industry is today—and I assume that even if you hate rock and roll, you know these two things. I was convinced, by the way the story was written, that Bruce knew his stuff—and I was even more convinced after he pointed out that I made a mistake when I "corrected" the spelling of one of the song titles mentioned in the story.

Is it necessary to appeal to one of my pet topics in order to sell a story to this magazine? Certainly not, or else every issue would be full of stories about old TV shows, stamp collecting, and the early days of the U.S. space program. Lots of times I take chances on stories that are built around esoteric subjects I don't know very much about, relying on my bogus detector (which is useful even for subjects I'm not well versed in) to clue me in when a writer is trying to cover up a pothole with a piece of cheesecloth.

One of the last criteria I apply before deciding whether to buy or boot a story has nothing to do with me. I simply try to answer the question, "Will any reader's bogus detector go off when he or she reads this?" One of the cardinal rules in this business is that if you make a mistake, *somebody* will notice. One of the goals I strive for is to put together a magazine that doesn't have any mistakes.

I'll do it one of these months. Maybe next month . . . ♦

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

As the long agony of the former Yugoslavia goes on and on, my thoughts turn to the ancient and bloody history of the place. There are principles working themselves out in this small tormented land that are worth careful consideration by those of us who like to write of the destinies of imaginary galactic empires—principles of historical karma, of the unyielding grip of the dead hand of the past.

Consider how the nations we now call Serbia and Croatia came into being:

Like virtually all of Europe from Britain and France to the shores of the Black Sea, they once were part of the Roman Empire. The Romans had absorbed the central and coastal region of Yugoslavia—the modern-day Croatia—as early as 155 B.C., after a long series of wars against the native Illyrian people. They gave the area the name of Dalmatia, imposed the Roman legal system on the Illyrians, and established Roman-style cities and towns for colonists who came over from nearby Italy.

The interior territories—not only modern-day Serbia, but regions in what now are Hungary and Austria, extending as far north as the Danube—came under Roman attack in the reign of Augustus, beginning about 35 B.C., and in the time of Augustus's successor Tiberius the area was organized into the Roman province of Pannonia. From the beginning of Roman Imperial times, therefore, the neighboring districts now known as Serbia and Croatia were under separate administration, though the popu-

lations of both places were quite similar, mainly Illyrians with some Roman settlers mixed among them.

As the increasing size of the vast empire made central administration an unwieldy proposition, the city of Rome itself lost its primary position as the seat of government. It became not at all unusual for emperors to emerge from provincial backgrounds. Several generals of Pannonian birth reached the imperial throne in the middle years of the troubled third century; and a native of Dalmatia, the powerful Diocletian, took command of the empire in the year 285, ruling vigorously for the next twenty years. Diocletian, the first to experiment with dividing the far-flung empire between several jointly ruling emperors operating out of different capitals, chose Dalmatia for his seat of rule, building a great palace for himself on the coast that still exists in the Croatian city of Split.

Constantine the Great, who eventually emerged as Diocletian's successor, made various attempts to reunite the empire under his sole control; but that proved impossible. By 395 the realm had been permanently divided into eastern and western empires, the eastern with its capital at Constantinople and the western based at Ravenna in Italy. And please take careful note of this important fact:

The boundary between the two empires ran right through what would one day be Yugoslavia. Dalmatia—the modern Croatia—became part of the Western Empire. Pannonia—including what is now Serbia—was assigned to the Eastern Empire. And

thereby hangs our tale; for the two regions experienced vastly different fates in the centuries that followed.

During those centuries wandering armies of barbarian tribes—Huns, Goths, Slavs, and many more—rampaged across Europe, bringing the old Roman regime down in ruins. The Western Empire, which had taken in most of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and central Europe, was overrun and entirely destroyed. The Eastern or Byzantine Empire, which ran from the Danube on into Syria and Egypt, fared much better, but it lost control of many of its European provinces, among them Pannonia, which fell first to the Huns, then to the Goths, then to a tribe called the Avars.

The shrewd Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, seeing that he was unable to stem the barbarian tide, formed an alliance with certain tribes that he regarded as friendly, and encouraged them to drive out the troublesome Avars. About 635, with Heraclius's backing, a Slavic tribe called the Croats took possession of the old Roman province of Dalmatia. About the same time, Heraclius supported the entry of a closely related group of Slavs, the Serbians, into what had been Pannonia.

Even so, the boundary line that had divided the two halves of the Roman Empire continued to exert its force. Under Constantine the Great, Christianity had become the official imperial religion; but bitter doctrinal disputes in the fourth and fifth centuries had led to the establishment of mutually hostile Western and Eastern branches of the Church with differing

liturgical practices and theological beliefs, one acknowledging the authority of the Bishop of Rome—the Pope—and the other under the control of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The Slavic Croats, strongly influenced culturally by the old Roman populace of the Dalmatian coast, gave their allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. They said their prayers in Latin, and those who were literate used the Latin alphabet. Their cousins next door, the equally Slavic Serbs, accepted the teachings of the Orthodox Eastern Church; they prayed in Greek, the official language of the Byzantine Empire and its Church, and used the Cyrillic alphabet, made up of Greek letters with special adaptations for Slavic sounds. Linguistically, genetically, culturally, the Serbs and the Croats had originally been very similar indeed. But a fluke of history had brought one group into the Eastern sphere of influence and the other into the Western, and that little accident of territorial distinction has survived now for fourteen centuries, leading directly to today's Yugoslavian tragedy.

The histories of both peoples from that point on are shot through with violent episodes. The Serbs, because their territory lay to the east of that of the Croats, struggled for centuries against Byzantine domination. Finally they established an autonomous Serbian kingdom in the twelfth century as Byzantium weakened under increasingly severe Turkish attack.

But the Serbs themselves came up against the Turks in the fourteenth century, and in 1459—a few years after they had finished off the tottering remnants of the once-glorious Byzantine Empire—the Turks annexed Serbia. The Serbs would remain under oppressive Turkish rule for the next 345 years, breaking free at last in 1804 and managing through many complexities to maintain their independence throughout the nineteenth century. (Bosnia, a piece of the old Roman province of Pannonia lying between the Serb and Croat territories that had also been settled by Slavic Serbians when the Roman Empire collapsed, was likewise conquered by the Turks. Unlike the Serbs of Serbia, who largely retained their Greek

Orthodox Christianity, most of the Bosnians converted to Islam under Turkish pressure—thereby lighting another fuse stretching into the twentieth century.)

As for the Croats, whose coastal territories looked westward into Roman Catholic Europe, they established a prosperous maritime kingdom in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but involved themselves in a war with their powerful rivals the Venetians and were greatly weakened. During the Middle Ages they were dominated now by the Hungarians, now by the Venetians. Like the Serbs, they came under Turkish attack, losing some of their territory to them. But with the aid of Austria-Hungary, which had emerged in the sixteenth century as a successor to the old Western Roman Empire, they were able to avoid falling to the Islamic conqueror. The price of their freedom was to swear allegiance to the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Ferdinand I, in 1527, and for the next four centuries the Croats remained largely under Austrian domination, interrupted by a period of French control in Napoleon's time.

During all these difficult times, migrations of fleeing peoples took place that resulted in pockets of Serbian settlement within Croatian territory, and the mixing of Croats into the Serbian lands. This, too, would make for trouble later on.

The whole intricate regional situation exploded early in the twentieth century, when a struggle between Austria and Turkey for control of Bosnia led to the outbreak of the First World War. In the aftermath of that chaotic struggle, the huge Austrian and Turkish empires both were dismembered by the peace treaty of 1919, and a host of newly independent nations appeared on the map of Europe—Czechoslovakia, Poland, Austria, Hungary, and something called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which soon afterward renamed itself "Yugoslavia."

And of what, exactly, was this country called "Yugoslavia" constituted?

Why, of Roman Catholic Croatia, and Greek Orthodox Serbia, and Moslem Bosnia, plus assorted other

adjacent fragments of the ancient Roman provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia. How neat, how convenient, to tuck them all into one charming little country!

But geographical proximity means nothing when great cultural chasms separate kinsmen. The Orthodox Serbs detest the Catholic Croats; the Croats loathe the Serbs. When Hitler and Mussolini carved Yugoslavia into autonomous protectorates in 1941, the Serbs and Croats once more found themselves living in separate countries, and the Croats, unhindered suddenly by the imposed patriotism of a central Yugoslavian government, turned on any Serbs they could catch and massacred them with astonishing ferocity. Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Serbs perished in Croatian concentration camps. The triumph of Yugoslavian Communism restored some measure of stability in 1946, but when the Communist regime fell apart a generation later, it was the turn of the Serbs to take revenge on the Croats. (And, meanwhile, these two peoples, still adhering to their rival branches of Christianity, both pounced on their other neighbors, Moslem Bosniacs.)

Those who yearn for quick and easy solutions in this struggle should bear in mind that the problem was created as far back as A.D. 395, when the Roman Empire was split into two realms, and was intensified soon after when Christianity underwent bitter schism, with the dividing line of these fissures cutting across the Balkan peninsula and separating what has become the land of the Serbs from the land of the Croats. That split has been unmendable ever since, with bloody results today as Serbs and Croats vent their age-old and long-repressed hatreds on one another. Creators of imaginary future histories take note: when the galactic empires are formed, unpredictable forces will come into play that will dominate the history of the universe for thousands of years thereafter—and the warring worlds of A.D. 10993 may look back in anguish at decisions made in the remote and half-forgotten fifth or sixth millennium that will prove forever impossible to undo. ♦

SCENES FROM A PAST AND FUTURE NOW

L. A. TAYLOR



Illustration by
Randy Asplund-Faith

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Waking, Maritt noticed the odor.

A green smell. Like bruised grass, with a dusty over-note that brought to mind a wide prairie under the blue arch of the sky: one of the training scents? Why pipe a training scent into the dorm?

I'm dreaming, she told herself, eyes closed, mind adrift. Her bedsack pressed against her side: had *Earth's Hope* accelerated? Maritt frowned. She couldn't recall any such orders on the pending board. . . .

Suddenly wide awake, she remembered: *emergency!* But she was in her bedsack—was the emergency a dream, too? No. The alarms she recalled had the feel of reality. And the ship was too silent.

She pushed her head out of the sack. Absolute blackness greeted her, where a dim red light should have revealed rows of bedsacks. Now Maritt noticed the absence of the usual subdued roar of the ventilation system. Swallowing panic, she tried to slide out of the sack. Yes, she told herself. She was supposed to be on duty. She had *been* on duty. Howin'th'namov had she ended up here?

So sleepy . . . and she was dreaming again, protesting even in the dream against the onset of sleep: *Something activated the port roll-control rockets; we're spinning; I have to reach—*

* * *

Waking, Maritt noticed the odor: the dark smell of fresh mud and animal scat. *Waterhole?* She wondered idly what a waterhole was really like, whether the virtual reality trainer had captured it fully, before the strangeness hit her: waterhole scent, in the dorm?

Why am I sacked?

She was supposed to be on duty—wasn't she? And something was wrong. Port rockets—something wrong with the portside steering rockets? No, something . . . Dimly, Maritt recalled waking once before.

"My God," she muttered. "How long have I been asleep?"

The sack would not let go of her: the fabric seemed to clutch at her hips and thighs as she tried to wriggle out of it. Of course; the ship was spinning—that was what pressed her against the sack!

That's right. The port roll-control rockets. Maritt hooked her thumbs over the mouth of the bag and shoved. Something wrong with her right arm. She kept pushing. At last her feet came free. At that moment the portside rockets shut down: Maritt felt the g-force shift. She clung to the bag for a moment to orient herself within the still-spinning ship, then started for the forward hatch. The sack next to hers was occupied.

Maybe it's all a dream? No, the lights should be on. Air should be rumbling at her. And she should be on the bridge.

Only three bedsacks met her hands before she felt the rim of the dorm hatch. *That's funny.*

Clinging to a handhold, Maritt looked reflexively behind her, still into total darkness. She hadn't even been in her own sack—*what* was going on? On her way through the hatch, she felt the ship jolt. Someone had not very deftly activated the starboard rockets, all of them, all at once, to stop the spin. Her fingers slipped from the hand-

hold. *Damn you,* Maritt thought. *You could've made an announcement!*

Maybe on-hold coms were out, too? As she groped for a handhold, Maritt's left hand brushed her right forearm. The arm was encased in thin . . . plastic? . . . extending from mid-hand—with a hole for her thumb—over her wrist and up her arm to cup her elbow and rise a few centimeters onto her upper arm. The fingers of her left hand found a hinge in the plastic at the elbow.

Now she became aware of a dull ache. *Broken?* But she hadn't broken her arm, not that she recalled, and a fitted, jointed plastic casing wasn't how the med officer would brace a broken bone. For that he'd use a fiberglass cast, just as doctors had been doing for the past couple of hundred years. Teeth chattering—*Nerves, Maritt?*—she hauled toward the bridge, finding each handhold by touch and habit.

She saw her goal at last, the hatch standing open—against the rules—and a light coming from within, a soft blue-green light, all wrong. Someone stood at the main control panel. Someone not human.

* * *

Construction of *Earth's Hope* began in 2079, a few years before Maritt's mother was born. The complexity of the project, the wrangles of bureaucracy, disagreements about whether the ship should even be built so deep that they had led to overthrown governments, financial uncertainty—all combined to delay completion until Maritt herself had reached her early twenties.

She was one of a self-selected few. Clearly, she had thought when she applied, clearly Earth would not be habitable for humans much longer, not if they went on living as they did. Just as clearly, life on Earth would continue past human domination, and clever people might well survive to build a new technology.

Might well, but not certainly. And the environmental idealism of the new project appealed to her. Nothing they took to a new planet would interfere with the local ecology in any way: everything was biodegradable. They wouldn't even take seeds from Earth, for fear of disrupting the natural vegetation.

Earth's Hope had never been intended for a general evacuation, but simply as a means of spreading the human race to other planets, to insure the survival of the species. An odd sort of insurance, wholly without guarantee: where a habitable planet might be, no one knew, although they had several candidate locations. Still, seventeen hundred people had boarded the ship in answer to a call for volunteers who could meet the criteria: healthy, without genetic disease, not more than forty years old, knowledgeable in more than one field, technically able. Most had been frozen for later revival. Maritt, too, had submitted to the liquid nitrogen chamber, knowing perfectly well that she might never awaken to use her skills.

She was one of the last revived. Greeted with cheers, she had thought *I'm important!* and had looked forward eagerly to the immediate task of colonizing the Earth-type planet that had surely just been found. Within minutes, she had learned that no planet had even been sighted. She was important because the present crew had found

most of the sleepers to be dead, even decayed. The idea that the thirty who ran the ship could be replaced with pretrained crew as they aged had long been abandoned. Every day, those who were awake had tried to revive a few others; every day they found more dead in their suspension capsules. Several months earlier they had made the decision to revive whomever they could and train them to tend the ship.

Four years before she woke to her nightmare, Maritt had accepted that she was one of the last crew to fly *Earth's Hope*. Sooner or later everyone else had given up, too.

This despite the children. Some of the present working crew had been born on the ship, the eldest a man of fifty-six. In recent years, the years Maritt remembered, five babies had been born. The twins were normal, one of the other three almost so. Another showed some potential: when she got older, she could probably do useful work despite her lack of pigmentation, hearing, fingers, and eyes. The fifth had not survived, mercifully so. Maritt's own two pregnancies had ended in blood far, far too soon.

And the ship itself was growing old, battered by space. Few days passed between emergencies—some vital, some (like today's) less threatening. Some problems, Maritt feared, might go unnoticed, disaster emerging only after it was much too late to avert it, as with whatever had gone wrong with the suspension capsules. This was the usual stuff of her nightmares. Nothing like this—this—was it a dream?

Maritt stopped at the bridge hatch. The creature at the control panel turned to look at her with large, blank, pale blue iridescent eyes. Insect eyes. Roughly the shape of a man, about her own size, in this odd light it seemed to have . . . skin? Scales? Chitin? Some natural covering of a slaty blue. The head was flat-bottomed, bulging at the back. About the face Maritt could tell nothing. A mask covered all but those eyes, with a remarkably manmade-looking flextube leading over the creature's shoulder to a back-pack held on with shoulder and waist straps.

Life support. This creature floated on the bridge of *Earth's Hope* as Maritt herself had floated in the VR scuba simulation of the ocean off Florida, lacking only goggles and flippers. The blank eyes and wide . . . shoes? . . . came close enough.

Poised to flee—Where?—Maritt realized that she was being addressed in human-sounding tones.

"Who are you?" she asked breathlessly. "Where did you come from?" The creature paused. After a moment it began to speak again, something closer to English, something she could almost understand. While it talked, she glanced about the bridge. The source of the strange blue-green light was a portable lamp secured above the command chair. Brought with it . . .

A sharp, medicinal odor caught her attention. Turning, she saw another of the creatures in the passage behind her. She drew aside in terror, but it merely pushed past her to confer with the first in a cascade of staccato clicks mixed with human-sounding vowels.

While they talked, Maritt swallowed her fear and edged

forward to try to figure out what had gone wrong in the dorm. Her gaze swept across the controls: all steering rockets idle, now. The ship was no longer spinning. The pattern of lights on the ventilation control panel was all wrong. *They've been messing with the controls*, she thought, *to see what they do. Grass, dung, in the dorm air . . .* She reached out and turned the dorm ventilation knobs to their usual positions, watched the light pattern shift in response, then started at the top of the panel to adjust the air supply in the rest of the ship. One of the creatures noticed what she was doing just as she reached the supply knob for the bridge, and moved toward her.

Against all instinct, Maritt stood her ground. She pointed at the grill over her head, pantomimed something coming from it to her face, and inhaled long and noisily. The creature stared at her for a moment, then raised a hand—a three-fingered hand, with pointed fingers so complexly jointed they seemed more like tentacles—to the opening. Air blew into the bridge, sweet freshened air. The creature stood with its hand raised for several seconds before it shifted its attention to the controls.

"No," Maritt protested, as it turned all the knobs back to their off position. "We need the air."

But it was only experimenting: with a stance suggesting sober attention it turned each of the knobs back to the position she'd left it in. The whirr of fans returned. The second creature now made a clacking remark, and the first turned: a third, a little shorter than the other two, was entering the bridge.

How many are there? Maritt wondered. "Who are you?" she asked again. "Where did you come from?"

"We," the latest to arrive said plainly, and stopped. "We—" It looked to the others as if for support. "We. Rescue."

"You're rescuing us?" Maritt asked.

The first one gestured to itself and its companions, saying, "We—Lothgali."

Maritt spread a hand on her chest. "Human."

"Yes."

The newest arrival pointed all three fingers of its right hand at itself and said, "Fix arm. Two stick."

Sticks? Maritt glanced at the plastic encasing her forearm. "Oh, you mean bones," she said.

"Bone." The Lothgali made a gesture with one hand. "You human now sleep," it added. The hair rose on her scalp. The one that had been on the bridge when she arrived made a clicking comment. The newcomer protested; the first one talked some more. Finally the newcomer gave a very human-looking shrug. "No sleep," it said. "Help learn."

* * *

When it came to information, the Lothgali were insatiable. Maritt soon discovered. Finding gaps in her own knowledge, two of them left and returned with Gib, still asleep and still in somebody's bedsack. *It would be Gib*, Maritt thought. The one man on board she couldn't stand. "Make no sleep," one of the Lothgali demanded.

"I don't know why he's sleeping," Maritt protested. "He shouldn't be."

"You fight," the one she had begun to think of as the

leader said. She had an instant's chaotic memory of fear, confusion and physical effort. "Gas make sleep." It touched a small canister at its belt.

"Heaven only knows what that is," Maritt thought, pushing Gib's bedsack down to his waist. She slapped his cheeks a little more smartly than she would anyone else's, saying, "Gib, wake up! Gib!"

"Don' wanna," he groaned.

"Gib!" She glanced at the Lothgali, who looked back at her—or she thought they did—with their blank iridescent eyes. She wished she could see their whole faces, although in all likelihood their features would tell her nothing, and might even be . . . unpleasant. "Gib, wake up!"

"Got visitors," he mumbled, and opened his eyes. "Oh, God, yes, we've got visitors."

"They call themselves Lothgali," Maritt told him in as sweet a tone as she could muster. "They've come to rescue us." She braced her feet against the wall to push Gib down as he started to struggle. "Calm down, damn it," she told him. "They haven't hurt anyone deliberately so far as I can tell, and they've seen my broken arm, so I don't think they're any immediate threat."

"They're on the ship, aren't they?" Gib pointed out. He grabbed her wrists and tried to dislodge her hands.

Pain shot through her right arm from wrist to shoulder. "You'll tear my arm apart, stupid," she snapped, wincing. "Listen to me. I've been talking to them, and I don't think—"

"That's your problem, woman! You don't think?"

"Whose problem?"

One of the Lothgali stepped forward. "Get other," it said. Freeing the gas canister from its waistband, it loosed a small pink cloud into Gib's face. The man's eyes rolled up. He sagged, floating just above the designated deck. As the pink cloud dispersed, the Lothgali hauled Maritt to the other side of the room and pushed her face toward the air vent. She was surprised at its touch, warmer than a man's; somehow she had expected those strange hands to be cold. *Can it smile?* she wondered, breathing deeply of the fresh air until it let go and went back to the control panel. She turned and watched as it activated the radio and spoke into it, apparently unafraid to be left alone with her.

Ten minutes later, the other two were back on the bridge with Jako between them, still sacked. Jako was awake, terrified.

"Jak," she said. "It's all right, I think."

He looked toward her. "Maritt?" His voice was a ghost of its usual vibrant baritone. He cleared his throat. "They took Gib away, and brought him back unconscious—"

"You know Gib," Maritt told him. "He wouldn't listen to them. They're trying to rescue us, they say—they speak a little English; how I don't know yet—and Gib was hostile, so they blacked him out. Apparently we put up a fight when they boarded, but I don't remember it."

"Me, either," Jako's tongue flicked over his lips. "What do they want from me?"

"They're trying to learn about the ship. I've been talking for hours, but I don't know enough, so they're looking for someone who does."

"Hours?" Jako managed a wan smile. "I assume you've introduced them to our music library."

"Music!" If *be can tease, be must be all right*, she thought. "No, I've just been feeding them technical stuff. Operations, so they can take us somewhere. Somewhere safe, they say." She looked away. "They say everyone in the suspension capsules is dead. There's just the thirty of us left, and the kids."

"Where are they taking us?"

"Someplace we can live, apparently. They don't seem to have the words to tell me."

Jako glanced at the nearest Lothgali, standing aside and gazing at him over its face mask. "I hope wherever it is has air we can breathe."

"Yes, air," the Lothgali said. "You hreathe. We, no."

"Are there other people?" Jako asked. "Another intelligent race that we can communicate with?"

The Lothgali paused a long moment. Just as Maritt decided Jako's question had been too much for its vocabulary, it said, "You will see. We have much time."

* * *

Much time, yes, but for Maritt time passed quickly. Within the month, the one who had treated her broken arm—N'hu—decided the plastic casing could come off. Opening one of the few Lothgali tool kits aboard, it took out a tiny toothed wheel with a handle and cord and casually plugged it into a wall socket.

"Isn't that *your* tool?" Maritt asked.

N'hu turned its head. "Yes."

"But it works on our ship, without modifica— without changing it?"

The Lothgali looked down at the tool in its hand. "Yes." Maritt stared as N'hu squeezed the handle of the tool and the little wheel began whirling. "That's unbelieveable."

"No. Good reason. You will see."

"N'hu," Maritt said, as the alien gently took her wrist in its hand and applied the spinning wheel: a saw, designed to cut precisely the thickness of the plastic shell, but not her skin. "Where are you taking us? What is this safe place?"

"We know a shelf," N'hu told her.

"A shelf?"

N'hu was silent for several seconds. "A step."

Maritt found this no more informative. "A step?" she echoed.

Again, a long pause. "A broken place."

"You're taking us to a broken place? Why? Broken how?" N'hu made the human-looking gesture of frustration she had seen so many times before and stared at her with its iridescent eyes. "Still in space?"

"Yes."

"But how will that rescue us?"

"We know a world. You will see." And that was as much as N'hu was willing, or able, to tell her.

The Lothgali ship, far larger even than their own, hovered beside them, matching course and speed. As soon as everything was ready, Chiu' told her, they would attach the *Earth's Hope* to the larger ship, to ferry it to the—shelf, step, broken place. Chiu' brought out a new word: discontinuity. But what the nature of the discontinuity

was, he could not explain, although he tried. Maritt had never quite grasped quantum physics, either; she had a feeling that if she had, Chlu's efforts might make more sense.

She was fascinated by the Lothgali: as their English improved (she discovered in the third week that they'd found and been using the English Second training tapes), they proved eager to answer as well as to ask questions. Their humanoid appearance was misleading. Not only their eyes, without iris or pupil, were different. They spoke with their unseen breathing apparatus, which Maritt imagined as a greatly modified gill, and ate through a mouth-slit, a tight-lipped horizontal opening in the chest, just about where their ribs would end if they had any. "That is how we can live with your air surrounding us," N'hu informed her.

Maritt felt shamed. She had never wondered how the Lothgali sustained themselves for such long stretches aboard *Earth's Hope*.

* * *

After weeks of ever more refined technical explanations about the ship, Maritt did introduce the Lothgali to the music library, an act she soon regretted.

They greeted the new sounds almost with greed, although to her disappointment they didn't think much of her own favorites—romantic Italian opera, Puccini and Verdi. What the Lothgali liked was a sort of mathematical precision: Bach, ancient Nigerian drummers and modern Aussie ones, ragtime, old-fashioned technopop, heartsynth. Like Maritt, they didn't care much for male voices chanting, whether medieval Catholic liturgy or Navajo ritual.

What they liked, they played every single hour of every single day.

Worse, they patched the com system to have music resound throughout the ship. The freedom to whistle or hum a phrase as she worked vanished. Monitoring instruments or dealing with an equipment breakdown while inside what felt like large church organ played at full volume was all but impossible. Having head-ringing drums echo her heart was no better, and synthjazz soon set everyone's teeth on edge. Jako, Gib, Maritt, Joanna, Tam, Keeth, Snarr, Detlev, Mike and Alex all complained bitterly, as did the twenty members of the other two shifts and all the children able to talk, but the Lothgali were unmoved. Eighteen were now aboard, the three Maritt had first met seemingly in charge. "The Troika," Alex once called them, snarling at the complex drum-voice ringing through the speakers. The nickname stuck.

Human beings torn by human music have to give sometime. She'd have thought Gib would break first, but it was Mike.

Maritt caught the motion out of the corner of her eye as Mike kicked off the hatch-frame. With a growl, he dove for N'hu and locked his hands around the smaller Lothgali's throat. "Mike!" she yelled above the baroque Mass boozing through the bridge.

Chlu was faster than she was: it had the gas-gun drawn before Maritt could take another breath or Jako could grab for Mike's wrists. A puff of pink gas put both Mike and Jako under in seconds. *Cum sancto spiritu*, a long-dead

choir sang fervently. "I am sorry," Chlu said. "I could not subdue one without disabling the other."

Just as Chlu bent over Jako to help him, Gib swung the hatch open. He took in the scene at a glance and sprang for Chlu, knocking the gas-gun away. N'hu scrambled aside. *In gloria dei patris*, exulted the choir. Maritt went after Gib, who had Chlu by the throat with one hand and was pummeling its tender mouth-slit without mercy.

"Gib, stop!" She grabbed his elbow, braced her knees against his hip, and tried to pull him away. "Stop it!" To her right she saw N'hu approaching with its gas-gun and held her breath.

But Gib held his, too. The pink cloud dispersed with no effect upon either of them. Jako's limp body, floating past, collided with hers. She lost hold of Gib. A grand choral *amen* thundered through the speakers. "Gib!" Maritt screamed. "Stop it!" She slid her left arm around his neck and squeezed. N'hu circled, the gas-gun ready, looking for an opening. Maritt gulped air and held it. *Amen, amen*. She felt Gib claw at her arm. Just as she thought her lungs would burst, Gib went limp.

Now N'hu used the gas. Maritt sprang for the air vent and clung there with her mouth against the grill. *Amen*. A three-fingered hand tugged gently at her own.

"They will recover," N'hu said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Maritt gasped. "I think so."

"The arm which is healing, that has no damage?"

"No," she said. "It doesn't hurt, anyway."

"Help, then, to be sure these do not attack again."

N'hu's plan was to stuff Mike and Gib into their bedsacks and take them to the crew dorm. Jako they webbed into a duty post with a still-moaning Chlu to watch over him.

"It's the music," Maritt told N'hu as the Lothgali helped steer Gib through the bridge hatch, into the waiting hands of two other aliens.

N'hu considered this for a moment. "Music has power to make insane?"

"Among other powers, yes." Maritt yanked the other bedsack up over Mike's shoulders and let the Lothgali take him away. "We don't mind if you listen, but all the time—"

"You find it arousing in some way?"

Close enough. Maritt nodded.

"We must consider this closely." N'hu turned its iridescent eyes toward her. "Your concord is needed. For the sake of both our races."

* * *

After the incident with Mike, two of the Lothgali went to their own ship. They returned with an object that rapidly frosted over as they carried it to the bridge. One secured the thing in the command chair with the safety webbing. "Let it warm," it said as it climbed out of its pressure suit. "Then we will show you what it is."

Four of the crew on duty, and a couple who weren't, braved a high baroque passacaglia to gather on the bridge. Gib and Mike, still trussed in their bedsacks, were dragged in by a team of Lothgali. To Maritt's shock, Chlu went to the control panel and shut off the music. In the wonderful silence, N'hu folded back the safety webbing and almost reverently unfastened the lid of a case.

"What is it?" Maritt asked, when he had exposed a pitted bronze plaque nested in some kind of insulation.

"It is yours."

On the plaque, pictures: a man and woman, naked. "White," Jako commented. "As usual."

Maritt nodded. The woman had long, straight hair. The man's was short, and he was beardless. "Do you know what this is, Jak?" Maritt asked.

"I . . . I should. It'll come back to me in a minute."

Maritt wondered what the Lothgali had thought when they first saw this picture. It didn't seem very clear: nipples and navel were dots with no hint of function, and the man's chest muscles and the lower edge of his ribs were indicated with lines that might as easily represent gills. Given the location, the Lothgali had probably thought the rib line represented something like their own small mouth-slits, organs used only for ingestion, made huge. She could imagine Chlu' pressing its own mouth-slit shut with its long fingers in stunned reaction. . . . The woman had no genitals. The man's had no clear purpose. Certainly not to creatures like the Lothgali. His hand was raised, but whether in greeting or threat wasn't immediately obvious. All in all, without having seen a human body in action or knowing anything about human society, Maritt doubted anyone would figure out what these things were or what was meant by them.

Below and to the left of the figures was a scheme of the solar system, showing something larger than Jupiter being thrust out of the system by an arrow of force with its origin at Earth. Maritt frowned. *Earth's Hope* was the largest vehicle ever built, wasn't it? Then what was this other thing?

"Voyager," Jako said. "It must have come from Voyager. Or Pioneer? One of them was supposed to carry something like this. Maybe both. I think there was a recording of earth sounds, too."

"What's this?" Maritt asked, pointing to a rectangle and a segment of a circle next to the man.

"Outline of the probe. That's what Voyager and Pioneer were, space probes, way back in the nineteens. I guess that's to show scale."

"Oh!" Seeing the rest of the outline now, Maritt re-adjusted her notion of the object thrust out of the solar system. Tiny, tiny, not over three meters wide. "Then this picture was attached to it? What's this?"

"Those fuzzed-up lines? I don't have the faintest idea. Or what those two joined circles might be. Chlu'?"

Chlu' traced the lines with one long, six-jointed finger. "We hoped you would say."

"I'm sorry," Jako told him softly. "But I've never seen this thing before. Where did you get it?"

"Our ship met with your . . . probe. We took it in, many . . . years ago. You cannot know how excited we were: this shows the truth of all our oldest legends."

Chlu' turned its iridescent eyes toward Maritt. "We have known from all time that some of us would meet you. That it is our ship which has the honor is even now not quite believable. When this came to us—" It gestured helplessly.

"Your legends say we would meet?" Maritt exclaimed.

"Humans and Lothgali, you mean? But that's—" She shrugged, a gesture as helpless as Chlu's.

"That is the source of our name," the alien said. "Lothgali. It comes honed by our speech habits from your own word, rescuers."

"That's ridiculous," Gib exclaimed, stung into speech.

Chlu' turned its head toward him, but said nothing. One of the other Lothgali said, "No. It is merely difficult to believe."

* * *

Months passed, with *Earth's Hope* clamped to the Lothgali ship, going wherever the Lothgali were taking them. One night, sharing a bedsack, Jako and Maritt talked in whispers each could barely hear. "I think we have something they need," Jako said, echoing her own thoughts. "They can't be doing this out of sheer altruism."

Maritt shook her head against his cheek.

"Gib's right," Jako said. "We have to watch out. But what can we do? All they have to do is flood our ship with their atmosphere—"

"Shh," Maritt breathed.

"You think they haven't thought of it? They're awfully fast with those gas-guns. Remember Nanci."

Nanci, the blind girl, had died a few weeks before, for no reason anyone could imagine. Forensics was not part of the crew's repertoire. The child had simply been found dead in her bedsack one shift-end. Willow, her mother, had wakened everyone with a scream Maritt now recalled with a shiver. "I think they decided she was useless," Jako went on. "Just as Willow says."

Possible. "But the twins . . ." she whispered. The twins were only three years old. They did no useful work. Someone had to watch them, someone had to teach them, fourteen hours a day. And Joanna's toddler—not that he'd learned to walk, not on the ship—Joanna's son, at a year and a half, consumed much of her time. But no harm had come to them, nor to the older child whose mind was slow.

"Watch," Jako breathed. "Watch."

Maritt watched. And listened. And learned nothing.

* * *

It was not just human music that the Lothgali relished. Getting to use any of the virtual reality units became almost impossible: it seemed as if some slate-blue body was always in harness, some iridescent eyes always covered by the goggles, whenever Maritt wanted to visit a museum or theatre, or even if she just wanted to refresh her training. No doubt at all, the Lothgali had an appetite for human culture. Among them they had differences in taste, of course: Maritt could almost tell who was using the VR by what had been called up. N'hui, for instance, by now knew all the ship had to offer of early European history, while Chlu' had probably explored every aspect of textile production ever considered by a human mind.

Strange.

"We will reach the discontinuity soon," Chlu' announced one day, when Maritt reported to the bridge. "We must begin preparations."

Working together, Lothgali and humans detached *Earth's Hope* from the gigantic Lothgali ship, a job that

took several shifts. Twelve of the Lothgali came aboard the human vessel to stay, bringing supplies of air and food to last for what Maritt thought would be quite some time. Piecing together a comment, a phrase, a hint, she had realized that the "broken place" was a way to get from one universe to another. Maritt dimly recalled learning about parallel universes in a science class, years before, but precisely how this transfer was going to work was beyond her comprehension. Chlu', when asked, tried to explain and at last gave up.

"We pass through the discontinuity in four of your days," the Lothgali told her casually a week or two later.

"How will you get back to our own universe?" Maritt asked. Chlu' gazed at her and shrugged. *So I was right*, she thought. *They'll be with us a while.* "Is your ship coming through, too?"

"Have you checked your viewscreens, Maritt?" the Lothgali leader asked. "Our ship is far behind, now."

"You've left it behind?" she said, startled.

"We can pass from one universe to another in only one direction," Chlu' told her. Maritt recognized sadness in its voice. "Once we come with you, we must stay. So our own ship will not come."

"I don't understand," Maritt said.

"When we left home, we did not know our destiny," Chlu' said patiently. "Seven hundred families live on our ship, and even though all the friends we left behind will long be dead when we return home, we do want to return . . ." It sighed, a very human-sounding sigh. "Or they do. But someone must go with you, and we have been chosen, because we know enough and have no mates or children to mourn us." Chlu' made as close to a palms-up gesture as its three-fingered hands would allow. "To ourselves, we seem poor material for gods, but that is how fate has named us."

Gods? Maritt wondered, confused. *Do they think they are gods, because they're coming to a new planet with us? Why?* "But we can't all breathe the same air," she protested. "We can't all eat the same things."

"When we have seen you safely onto your world, we will take your ship to ours," Chlu' said.

"But—"

"There is where we become gods." She felt somehow that Chlu' had held back, that there was something else to know, something important, but at that moment she didn't quite dare question it. For the first time in weeks, the blankness of its iridescent eyes gave her a chill.

At the beginning of her shift, one of the Lothgali met her at the bridge hatch and told her to go back to her bedsack. "We must spin the ship," it said. "That will prevent its imploding in the discontinuity." She could almost hear it add, *We hope*. "If you are in your bedsacks you will be less likely to be injured."

As she made her way back to the dorm, she felt the gentle beginning of the spin. *They tested*, she thought. *That's why the ship was spinning, that first day.* But if she remembered the ship spinning before she slept, why didn't she remember the Lothgali boarding?

The gas? Climbing into her sack, still puzzled, she

stretched out to let the spin press her against the bulkhead. *The gas.* That must have been it. Like getting a head injury? So that the most recent memories never got recorded? So that she'd remembered only that an emergency had existed, and feeling the spin in her sleep, had confused it with that?

Possible, she decided, as the pressure of her body against the wall increased.

"What are they doing?" a voice asked out of the red dimness. "The ship's going to fly apart!"

But they don't want to die themselves, Maritt thought, struggling for breath against centrifugal force. *What if they've miscalculated our strength?* Panic rose. She couldn't move. *If all this time, they've been wrong?*

A blackness came over her. How long it lasted, she never knew. She wasn't sure the Lothgali did, either.

* * *

If they had in fact changed universes, Maritt could not see how to tell: the viewscreens showed stars like the stars they had left behind; the ship responded to its controls just as always. "It's all a con," Gib said angrily. "All they did was spin the ship until we all blacked out. We're lucky the damn thing didn't just fly apart! They killed five people for nothing. What the hell do they want from us?"

Five had died in the transition, all shipborn: the two eldest men, one woman, Joanna's son, and one of the twins.

"I don't think they anticipated the deaths," Jako remarked.

"No?" Gib inhaled fiercely. "I think they wanted to weed out the weaklings, that's what I think. They've already modified part of the hydroponics system to grow their own food. Five fewer mouths—five fewer *human* mouths—makes everything five mouths simpler."

"Then why didn't they do it ages ago?" Keeth asked.

"Because—" Evidently, Gib didn't have a because. His mouth snapped shut. *He'll never learn to think before he speaks*, Maritt told herself sadly. What dangers would he get them into?

But maybe Gib was right. Because, if they *had* changed universes, they had at the least discovered a segment of the new one very similar to what they had left. Not two months passed before Chlu' greeted Maritt's arrival on the bridge with jittery excitement. "Look," it said. "We have located your new sun, at last!"

Maritt went to the viewscreen to look. The long flexible finger she thought of as Chlu' s thumb pointed to a white-gold star in the lower left quarter of the screen. "There."

Certainly the right type of star, close and brilliant. "How far away is it?" she asked.

"Another month."

The supplies the humans had brought with them to use on the new planet—clothing, shelter, tools, all chosen to be biodegradable, all chosen to work without the need of a large industrial backing—had been assembled in a cargo bay near the ground shuttle before *Earth's Hope* had left Terran orbit. Now Chlu' prodded the humans to check over their supplies, to be certain they knew how to use everything they had brought. Foodstuffs were added, frozen and dried.

"When we get there," Gib told her, a few days later. His voice was a harsh undertone that scared her. "I'm alerting everyone. As soon as we see the new planet, as soon as we're sure—" He broke off as Joanna came into the room.

"What are you planning, Gib, a revolution?" she asked. "Something like that."

"You'll only get yourself killed."

Gib gazed at her with a calm malevolence. "One word to them, Joanna, and we'll see who gets herself killed." He glanced back at Maritt, whose mouth had floated open. "We'll make sure the planet will support us. Get all the supplies down. Last one off the ship—that's me—sets a timed explosive, to blow up the ship and have it burn up in the atmosphere a little at a time, just as we originally planned."

"Why not just let them have the ship, if it's no more use to us?" Maritt inquired.

"Do you want to be somebody's farm animal?" Gib demanded. "Because that's what we're going to be now that we've all lived through this—you know it, Maritt. No, we'll blow the ship up, with them on it."

Joanna chuckled. "You say."

"I'm the demolitions expert, Jo," Gib said quietly. "Remember?"

* * *

Her sense of fairness outraged, Maritt gave the Lothgali a warning. "N'hu, Gib will kill me if he suspects that I've told you," she added anxiously. The Lothgali put its warm hand on her arm, the one broken in their initial struggle, the one it had set.

"We will be careful," it said. "He will not suspect you, and we will not be harmed."

"But you see, don't you, why he's upset?" The Lothgali shook its head. "Because we don't know why you are doing this—Chlu's says it's because you will become gods, but that makes no sense to us at all."

Turned toward her, N'hu's eyes were less iridescent: Maritt knew how to tell when a Lothgali was looking directly at her. As now. "Now that we have crossed the broken place, we go first to your world and put all of you and all your supplies on the surface," it said. "Then we adapt your ship to our comfort and go to our world."

"Yes, I've been told," Maritt replied with an impatient nod.

"Bringing with us your technology, which at this particular time our race most desperately needs."

Maritt considered this. "Prometheus with fire?"

N'hu nodded. "On your world, you will find a race in bud, and bring it to flower. On our world, we will find a race on the verge of death, and help it to survive."

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"Don't you understand, Maritt?" N'hu still looked directly into her eyes. "This is what you *always* do; this is what we always do. What you and we will do again, when the time comes again."

"No," she said. "I don't understand."

N'hu shrugged, that human-looking shrug. "You will."

"But how do you know that?"

The Lothgali was silent for a moment. "Our species is

far longer-lived, and has a better memory than yours," it said finally. "Or perhaps it is just that we will have records to venerate, and you will have none."

Reincarnation, she thought. Karma. The endless Wheel of Being. So many peoples had faith in some kind of coming again—was their belief the echo of a memory?

* * *

The day before the scheduled landing, Gib confronted her in the crew dorm. "The explosives are missing," he said through his teeth.

Maritt felt a chill of fear go down her spine. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that what I need to blow up the ship has been taken out of our supplies. The ones I personally checked just three days ago. At which time the explosives were there."

"Are you sure?"

"Are you calling me stupid? Of course, I'm sure." Maritt tried to slide by him toward the hatch, but Gib planted a hand against her shoulder to stop her. "Now what I want to know is, who's the traitor? My bet's on you."

"Why a traitor?" Maritt asked unsteadily. "You think they're stupid?" Her words got more heated. "You think they don't know what you think about them by now? You think they haven't got the sense to get rid of anything you can threaten them with?"

He wasn't sure: even in the dimness of the dorm, she could see that in his face. "Use your head, Gib," she said. The pressure of his hand against her shoulder lessened. "Remember what *Earth's Hope* is for—we're supposed to populate the world we find. Five women and twenty-two men are all we have. Kill me or Joanna, and that lowers our survival chances by twenty percent."

His hand left her shoulder. "You watch yourself, Maritt," he muttered, and drifted away.

* * *

The planet looked astonishingly like Earth, a blue-green gem swirled with white clouds. True, the continents weren't quite right—Asia and Alaska were joined, for instance, and Florida was twice its proper length—but it had a moon that to Maritt's eye was identical with the one she remembered.

Even the Lothgali had some doubts about the ground shuttle, clamped unused to *Earth's Hope* for who knew how many years. But the transfer of humans and supplies to the planet's surface went smoothly enough. Within two days, the thunder of the Lothgali takeoff rolled over the small band of humans. *I'll miss them*, Maritt thought with surprise, watching the shuttle become a silver flock and the contrail distort in the upper winds. She silently wished them good luck.

She should have felt relief: nothing made the air unbreathable; the river the Lothgali had set them beside ran fresh. Instead, despite the hours each had spent in the VR trainer, what Maritt and everyone else felt was fear. The broad sky—blue, not grey—over rolling grassland seemed to stretch their skulls to the bursting point, the better to suck out their quivering brains. The shipborn whimpered in hastily erected tents, while those who remembered Earth worked with their eyes on the ground. For years,

they had been exercising, subjecting themselves to accelerations, taking every possible means of strengthening themselves, but long travel had weakened every one of them. The shipborn gradually faltered, while the rest gained stamina with painful slowness.

The long days passed. "This isn't what I imagined," Maritt said once to Willow.

"It isn't what anyone imagined," Willow replied. How calm she sounded! *Am I the only one with second thoughts?* Maritt wondered, and kept quiet for the sake of the others' peace.

* * *

Every evening the remnant crew of *Earth's Hope* compared notes around the fire, to try to consolidate their successes and avoid repeating failures. Clearly, the human colony would have to fight hard to survive. All the remaining shipborn and one man born on Earth died within the first month. The survivors were too weak to bury them. Instead, the dead were wrapped and left on a hillside to join this new Earth on their own. Animals gnawed the bodies, to everyone's shock and terror.

Plans made for a colony of several hundred could not be carried out by two dozen weakened individuals. What is biodegradable will biodegrade. Maritt could see it all coming: over the years, tools would wear out; the tents would rot; the food supplies, even supplemented by gathering and the occasional small animal felled by a well-aimed rock, would dwindle inexorably. What Maritt had thought of as ecological responsibility when they left Earth now appeared as total madness. One stainless steel knife. That was what she wanted. Just one ordinary stainless steel knife: a simple twenty-centimeter blade haunted all her dreams. Or a handful of beans not ready-ground into flour, to plant.

And there were the Cousins.

Maritt marked time by the phases of the moon. Four months had gone by according to her reckoning when the first of the Cousins appeared. Three of them, three men, came upon the encampment in the late afternoon of a sweltering day. *Earth's Hope's* men and the other two women were out hunting food, while Joanna and Maritt had been left to tend their hard-won fire and try to repair some clothing.

Nudged by Joanna, Maritt looked up.

The trio stood gazing at them with mouths gone slack. *Homo erectus*, Maritt thought. Small men, a meter-forty or so, with slanting foreheads. Human enough in body, their features seemed monkeyish: brown eyes under brows pushed forward on bony ridges, protruding mouths with thin lips. Their black skins were covered with fine, short hair, more than in the reconstructions. Ragged black hair capped their heads, and scanty beards struggled over chinless jaws. One held a spear, a long straight stick with a blackened point. Another had a chunk of animal hide slung at its hip, a carryall of some kind. The third was simply naked, and a little younger than the other two, she thought: its muscles were smoother, its beard even sparser.

Joanna recovered first. "Hello," she said.

The men did not move. After a time, one grunted,

"Don't get up," Joanna whispered to Maritt, as she shifted from sitting into a squat. Joanna herself stayed cross-legged on the ground. The man who had grunted turned to the others and said something in a low voice, four or five syllables no more comprehensible than the Lothgali's clicking tongue. He pointed at the fire. The three edged forward. The spear was upright, at rest. Maritt tried smiling. One man smiled back.

At that moment Gib came over the small rise behind the encampment. He shouted and charged down the hill. Seconds later the three newcomers fled as four other men topped the rise and started to run—but the spear was already shuddering in Gib's chest.

* * *

"They were scared," Joanna said that night. "That's all."

Maritt, holding Gib's sweating hand, nodded at the others crouched in the firelight. "Before Gib came hollering down the hill, they were just—I don't know, curious? Trying to figure us out, I think. Not threatening."

Joanna agreed. "If we just steer clear of them, we should be okay."

The discussion dragged on. Those who had seen them agreed with Maritt that the men were some sort of human precursor. Who first referred to them as the Cousins, Maritt never remembered. But Cousins they were called, and Cousins they remained.

Only when they had decided to post a guard, and everyone was preparing to sleep, did Maritt realize that she was holding the hand of a dead man.

* * *

A few days later, Alex began riding Jako, who had little to offer to most of their evening discussions. "How about it, noble savage?" he asked. "When you gonna tell the rest of us how to make it here?"

"I'm not a savage," Jako said stiffly. "I'm a civilized city-bred twenty-second-century man."

"You say," Alex sneered.

"I don't know the first damn thing about survival," Jako snapped. "Ask the Cousins; they're the experts."

Ask the Cousins. Not for help. Fifteen men and four women remained: as Maritt counted full moon after full moon, most of the men found bands of Cousins and joined them, leaving only Jako and two others with the surviving women. "Don't you want to spread your genes, too?" Maritt asked him one evening.

Jako was silent longer than she'd anticipated, twisting long strands of grass into strings to mend the mesh of a gathering bag. "Only with you," he said finally, and put a hand on her swelling belly. "This is mine, isn't it?"

"Yours," she said, fairly sure. "But I thought . . ." She trailed off, not sure how to say what she thought.

"Why should I want to spread my genes?" Jako asked.

"Back on Earth, I read a lot about human evolution," Maritt began. Jako, now weaving the grass into the bag, shrugged.

"An enormous controversy went on, a hundred and fifty or so years before we left. One school of thought held that people evolved steadily from a previous form. The other thought there was a spurt of evolution that lasted only a short time, about a quarter-million years ago."

Jako put a hand inside the bag and examined it for other weak spots. "So?"

"Don't you get it, Jak? Don't you remember the Lothgali saying they got their name from the people their ancestors rescued? The people who argued for an evolutionary spurt were right. The humans the Lothgali got their name from were that spurt. We are that spurt here. Look at all our men mating with the Cousins! The Cousins are our ancestors—I mean, of *Homo sapiens*—or will be, I think. But it's our blood that will make them so."

"I'm my own grandfather," he sang lightly.

"Quit that. It's not funny."

"You're far too serious, Maritt," Jako said soberly. "Look at you, keeping your calendar, and for what? What difference does time make, here?"

"But keeping time is what makes us human," she protested.

"Is it?"

"How else will we know when anything happened?"

"Does it matter?" He set the gathering bag aside and faced her, arms folded across his knees. "You're hanging onto the old Earth for dear life, Maritt. That's all you're doing with that calendar. You don't want to believe you're here forever, that we are here forever. But scratches in the bark of a tree won't give back the Earth you remember, no matter how many you make."

He's right, she thought. She recalled a conversation she'd had with Snarr, not long before he, too, had cast his lot with the Cousins. How it had started, she wasn't sure, but she remembered that he'd had some idea they'd traveled backward in time, and she'd told him what N'hu had tried to explain: they had entered a different universe from their own, one where Earth was younger. That both N'hu and Chlu' had said that humanity and the Lothgali had been clasped in a fateful dance, that they had known in advance everything that would happen.

"How many parallel universes are there, do you think?" Snarr had asked.

"An infinity."

He had looked thoughtful. "How many more Earths do you think we will destroy?"

"How many do you think we have already destroyed?"

That had shaken him. Maritt could see him lose spirit, as if something tangible had drained from his face, the way the face of a dead man drains of blood. Two days later, he was gone, in a way that she could never go.

Yet the very same idea that drove Snarr to the Cousins was what tied her to the planet of her birth. Odd.

* * *

Just after dawn on a day whose pearly sky promised more of the usual heat, one of the men who had joined the Cousins came back. "Keeth's here," Maritt heard Willow shout joyously. "Hey, folks, Keeth's come back!"

Maritt shook Jako awake and crawled out of their hut. Keeth stood near Willow's firepit. He was as naked as a Cousin, and darker and skinnier than ever. "Keeth," she cried, running toward him. "Welcome home!"

"Not home, Maritt," he said, hugging her with one long black arm. "I'm just here to teach you some stuff I've learned from the Cousins."

She pulled back. "Oh?"

Jako, yawning and rubbing his face, walked toward the group. "Hey, Keeth," he said, holding out a hand. "What doing?"

"Got some stuff to show you."

Most of the remaining group had now assembled. Keeth bent and picked up a stiff raw-leather sling, from which he drew an object. "Tools," he said. "Hallmark of human society, hmm?" He passed the object to Willow, who examined it and passed it on to Alex. "Gonna teach you how to make those babies. How to tell the right rock, how to hit it."

The thing came around the circle. A hand axe, like something out of the VR Smithsonian. Maritt weighed the crudely shaped flint in her hand. She envisioned a cameo she had been shown, way back before leaving Earth: a salmon-red dragon carved in minute, exquisite detail on a creamy background, every scale distinct. It had looked about to take flight, although no larger than a bumblebee. How many years, how many eons, before such things were seen again? She was holding the first step toward the dragon in her hand.

But it was Willow who learned to make the best tools, and who invented, or reinvented, the way to make a good sharp edge by pushing off tiny flakes with the tip of a gazelle horn. Jako reinvented the haft.

* * *

Maritt bore a daughter and, when that child was barely walking, another. Several times the little settlement picked up and moved to a more fruitful location. Always near water, always tucked below a rise, always in the grasslands, surrounded each time by ill-tended patches of plants that had proven edible. From time to time one of the men visited as Keeth had, to teach them something. How to fire-harden the point of a spear. Which mushrooms were good to eat. How to catch and roast crickets. "They taste like salted peanuts," this man told them. Hungry, everyone ate; yes, roasted crickets tasted very much like salted peanuts.

A band of howling Cousins descended upon them and kidnapped Joanna. They moved again. A rainy season later, Maritt met Joanna on a narrow track at the bottom of a ravine. "Come back?" Maritt asked.

Joanna echoed her invitation, then said, "No." She shook her head. "No. They're kind to me, Maritt. I eat much better, now. And I'm pregnant. It's one of theirs, one of the Cousins."

How could you? Maritt wanted to ask, but didn't.

* * *

More seasons passed. One afternoon Maritt, again large with child, sang as she worked on a basket she was weaving out of grass. The song was an aria from an opera over two hundred years old on the day it was recorded for the use of *Earth's Hope*. By now, back in that other universe, it was of an age she could never calculate. But her voice lacked the rich clarity of the soprano she remembered from the stage of the VR theater, so when Jako came unexpectedly around the side of their hut she broke off.

"Don't stop," he said.

"Oh!" Her hand waved despairingly. "It's nothing like the real thing."

"Pretty, though."

Maritt shrugged. "That's what I miss most," she said, standing up. "Real music."

Jako chuckled. "Even after what the Lothgali did to us?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, oh, yes! That was so long ago, Jak, how could it matter? Imagine having had Schubert's E flat major piano trio, and losing it." Jako gave a little so-what toss of his head. "Seriously, Jak. Mozart. Imagine losing Mozart! Pergolesi, Brahms, Stravinsky, Hentingast, Algro—all of them!"

"Say nothing of the rest of the world." Jako rolled his gathering bag off his shoulder and let it slide to the ground.

"What?"

"The rest of the world. Everything you've just named is classical and European."

"Oh." Immediately a nasal chant came to her inner ear, yearning phrases with an irregular drumming accompaniment, the words in a language dead before she was born and lost to all understanding. "Yes, I see."

Jako put a hand on her shoulder. "In a couple hundred thousand years or so," he said, "If you're right about us, someone will write another *La Bohème*, another Schubert will write another E-flat major trio"—Maritt sniffed angrily, but he kept on—"and all the other human music, from everywhere, whether you cherish it or not, it will all come back. Even Bach, though I for one have had enough fugues to last me forever." Jako paused, watching her. Maritt slowly shook her head. "Don't you think so?"

"No." She recalled Chlu' as she'd first seen it, addressing her in a gabble that had slowly turned into something she could understand: Chlu' had started out in what N'hu once called the ritual greeting language, English, as spoken somewhere else, in another universe. "No, we'll never have exactly that again," she insisted. "It's all lost."

Jako laughed through his nose. "You're such a pessimist."

"The one thing we know for sure is that someday another ship will be named *Earth's Hope*, or something like that, and groan out of its construction orbit on a fool's hunt among the stars. . . ."

"Ech," Jako said. "You're no fun to talk to anymore, Maritt, you know that?" He picked up his gathering bag and went into the hut.

Left alone, Maritt climbed the small rise beyond the huts. From here, she could see the grasslands spread far into the distance. To the south a line of thunderheads curdled above the horizon, the tops blinding white and the darker bodies lit now and then by lightning—probably why Jako had returned so early. In the middle distance, the outrider clouds spread over the sky. Maritt saw a small band of the Cousins racing for shelter in the nearest ravine. Among them was someone whose hair glinted yellow. Snarr, or Alex.

But the sun still shone on Maritt, on the tiny settlement, on the nearby flattened tops of the grove of acacias—real acacias, according to what she recalled of the botany she had learned. How close had what they taught her come to what she would have known had she learned from Earth itself, instead of from the tapes in the VR trainer? A sort of vision came over her, a muddle of human history, a swirl of dance and song and drum and string. What would they all think, all those people, if they could see her now, just as she was, half-naked on a plain in what would perhaps someday be Africa?

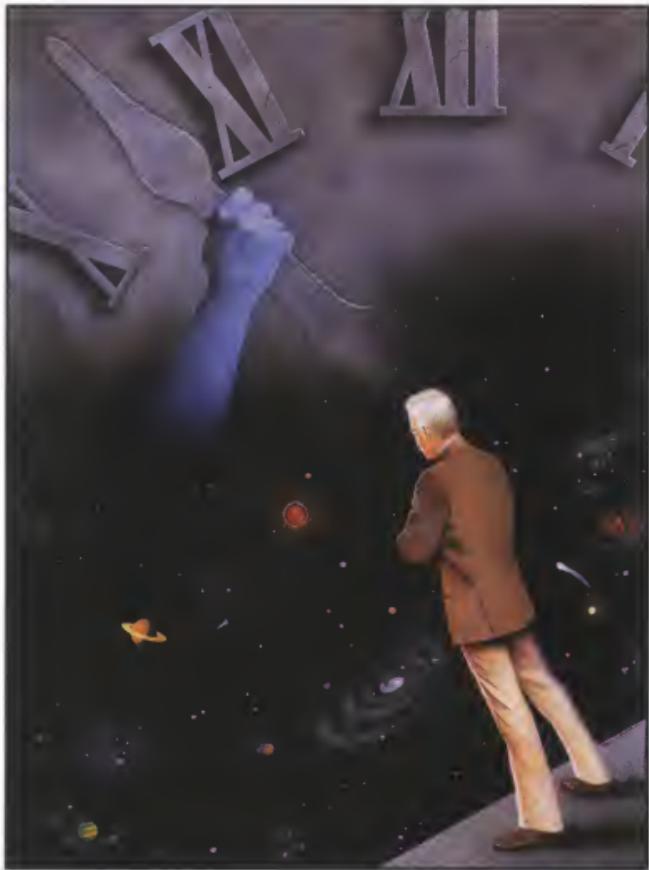
Lost, all lost, and if it came again it would only be lost again. Yet what could she do, one woman in the face of a quarter of a million years of human history?

The storm came closer. A stroke of lightning flashed from the base of the clouds to a single tree, still five or six kilometers away. She sighed and turned back to the hut, where Jako was raking coals from the fire pit into a basket of green leaves to save them from the rain. He was talking to the children in the hut, sounding overly jovial as he did when upset.

That's my life, Maritt thought. Her hands rested on her swollen belly, where a child kicked. *My future, my hope*. She resolved to leave the old Earth behind as Jako had, and live as best she could. With luck, she could pass on some part of her vision to her children, to the others. Maybe she could make this the last Earth, save it somehow from thoughtless humanity, so that on the next, the Cousins would grow to be themselves. . . . A worthy goal. Great relief surprised her, as if she had rolled a gathering bag from her shoulders onto the ground.

Addio, a woman sang softly in Maritt's remembering ear. *Addio, senza rancor*. At peace at last, she went back to the hut. ♦

Old as You Feel



Michael D. Winkle

ARGUS had struck the universe a mortal blow. The new Space Telescope scanned the galaxies, monitoring IR waves, UV waves, X-rays—the whole spectrum—with no interference from terrestrial sources. ARGUS scrutinized the farthest quasars and analyzed the weakest radio emissions. The students at Northeastern State were excited. The instructors were awed. Hendricks was miserable.

"Damn!" he muttered, glaring at the computer screen. He deleted the paragraph that had taken him twenty minutes to write. The cursor waited patiently in the upper left-hand corner.

His mind was not on Monday's lecture. It wasn't on much of anything, any more.

Illustration by Ian Weller

Although he taught biochemistry and microbiology at Northeastern, astronomy was Hendricks's passion. At least, it had been in the days of blissful ignorance, before ARGUS. He had been a diehard Steady-State since childhood, a believer with Thomas Gold and Fred Hoyle in the Perfect Cosmological Principle. In dreams he had soared through space like the hero of Stapledon's *Star Maker*, contemplating an infinite, unknowable, immutable cosmos. He did not really believe in the immortality of mind, body, or soul, and he had doubts about the survival of his species, but he was always certain that the universe—and some life, some intelligence, somewhere—would carry ever on.

Now he was not so sure. ARGUS had discovered colossal black holes in the centers of the galaxies, of greater mass than all the suns orbiting them put together, slowly but surely drawing the satellite stars in. Between galaxies ARGUS found great clouds of free electrons and nuclei. Nearer to home the Space Telescope detected numerous brown dwarfs, accretions of gas and dust larger than Jupiter, yet still too small to flare into thermonuclear life, and Compact Structures, clots of gas as wide as the Earth's orbit but far tinier than nebulae.

The significance of these observations was that ARGUS had located the Missing Mass, the dark matter needed for a closed universe, a cosmos that would eventually collapse upon itself as it had once expanded and died in a Big Crunch as it had begun in a Big Bang.

The universe was not infinite. It was not eternal. Although its lifespan was millions of times longer than his, it was just as mortal as Jeremy Q. Hendricks.

* * *

He didn't often come to his office on Saturday, but it was quiet here, and he thought he could work without interruption. Thing was, he couldn't work.

He stood up and groaned. His whole body felt like his back used to just before he got the kinks out.

He was fifty years old. Half a goddamn century. It felt more like half an eon. He felt as old as the universe, a cold, dark, unfriendly void filled with dust and rocks.

And gas. He opened the door and headed down the hall toward the men's room. Out of another office stepped George Philpott, the young astronomy and computer science instructor.

"Hey, J. Q.! What're you doing here on Saturday?"

Hendricks groaned again. Philpott was always so cheerful it made him puke. With his thick glasses and bristly beard, he looked like Steven Spielberg.

"I'm preparing my lecture for Monday on hemoglobin and myoglobin. I needed some reference material I forgot yesterday."

"Short-term memory again, huh? Listen, I was just on my way to lunch. Want to tag along?"

"No. First I have business . . . down the hall. Then I'm going to pick up my mail."

"Mail? They don't deliver on campus Saturdays, old man."

Hendricks winced.

"I forgot to pick up the mail yesterday."

Philpott was not often at a loss for words, but he

seemed to be now, the way his mouth formed an O in his beard. No one liked receiving mail more than Hendricks, and everybody knew it. But that was the old Hendricks.

He snorted. *Old.*

He muttered good-bye to Philpott and went on to the restroom. When he emerged, the younger man was gone. Hendricks entered the Physical Sciences office and pulled the mail from his cubbyhole.

There was a note from Moore, the sandy-haired kid in his microbiology class, complaining that the A he got on his mid-term was too low. *Too low!* If Hendricks had had any energy left, he would have written a nice little note back, right then. There were the usual fliers from Merrell Scientific and GIBCO, advertising centrifuges and Pyrex beakers, and there were several medical and legal forms from Cape Canaveral and Washington.

Hendricks had a roomful of forms at home. He had applied for a seat on a Space Shuttle five years ago, and ever since then the forms had come. They demanded to know if he had ever been diagnosed as having cancer, diabetes, the HIV virus, allergies, kidney ailments, high blood pressure, astigmatism, coronary problems, malaria, and several things he was sure they made up. He had described in excruciating detail every operation he had ever undergone, from his ingrown toenails to his last root canal. Then he had to dig up his ancestors' medical histories.

And then came the physicals. Lots of physicals. He had more punctures in his arms than a junkie, and his butt ached when it rained. He had pissed enough to fill a swimming pool, and he had given samples of every other substance the human body could produce.

He had really wanted to fly on a Shuttle. He had badgered Senator Hume and General Kirkpatrick, his old college buddies, until they tugged the right strings for him. Now he didn't see the point. It was all futile, whether the ships of coming times blew up on the launchpad or sailed effortlessly to the stars. It would come to the same end eventually, whether that end was tomorrow or ten billion years from tomorrow.

He tore the forms in half and dropped them into the circular file. Most of them made it; he ignored the bits of paper that spun and skittered like leaves onto the wooden floor.

* * *

The afternoon was overcast. The world was grey. Real leaves dropped from trees like flakes off scabs. They scurried along the sidewalk like cockroaches. They were the same color as cockroaches, too, and only a little larger than the Carboniferous monsters in Hendricks's kitchen. He remembered the autumn colors of his youth, out in the country, where people led peaceful Norman Rockwell lives. The trees back then looked like pumpkins, sunsets, candy apples, and hearth fires. Here the leaves were the color of tobacco spit, cigarette ashes, and rust.

Each year cosmic history was played out all around him, but he had never noticed. Spring, summer, fall, winter. Someday winter would come and never go.

There were students on campus even on Saturday, walking or cycling along as if there really were some destinations worth reaching. Why did they all look so damn

happy? They had grown up with AIDS, meltdowns, the Greenhouse Effect, child molesters, and terrorists all around them.

"Don't they know? It's all for naught."

* * *

The Crock o' Gold on Stonchurst called itself a pub. It was a crock, all right. It looked like any other bar to Hendricks—what little he could see in the Stygian darkness—except for a couple of shamrocks cut out of construction paper taped here and there. The bartender's name was supposedly Sean, but Hendricks knew for a fact it was really Hymie.

"Clone," he muttered.

"Mmm?" asked Sean/Hymie.

I said all bartenders are part of the same clone. Fat, rubbing the same goddamn shot glass with the same goddamn rag." He swallowed the rest of his Scotch whiskey. The liquid burned in his throat like kerosene. "Gimme another."

"Overdoing it a little, aren't we, Professor?" asked the bartender, though he complied with Hendricks's command.

"Not driving, am I?" retorted Hendricks.

"Okay, okay, don't bite my head off," said Sean/Hymie. After a moment, however, he continued. "Care to tell me about it?"

"Izzat what they teach you to say in bartender school?"

"C'mon, Professor, I've known you for ten years. You haven't ordered Cutty Sark since the *Challenger* went up."

"Really want to know?" asked Hendricks, bending forward conspiratorially.

"I'm all ears."

"The universe is coming to an end."

The bartender's left eyebrow rose like Mr. Spock's. "When?"

Hendricks shrugged. "Few billion years."

Sean/Hymie's other eyebrow rose as well. "Better make out my last will and testament quick, then."

"You don't understand," muttered Hendricks. He took another swallow of whiskey. He hacked once or twice as he continued.

"It doesn't matter *cough* when. It *will*, that's the important part. Nothing *burrack* you, or I, or anybody else does will matter. Nothing will be left."

"How can you worry so much about something that's gonna happen a zillion years after we're all dead and buried?"

"You don't understand," the professor grumbled again. He hunched his shoulders until he resembled a turtle drawn into its shell. Sean/Hymie took the hint and moved on.

Hendricks stared at his reflection in the pub's mirror. The crow's feet around his eyes had taken a stroll over his face. His hair and mustache, once an enviable golden-brown, were now grey-white, and his bald spot grew more obtrusive every day. The loose skin beneath his lower jaw hung like the dewlap of an iguana. He never believed the universe could end before. Deep down inside, he never believed he could grow old and die, either.

Suddenly there was a new face in the mirror. Hendricks tensed when he recognized Philpott's glasses and beard. Then he flinched as a sheaf of papers slapped loudly on the walnut counter beside him.

"What the hell is this?"

Hendricks looked up, startled. It was Philpott, all right, but he'd never seen that Spielbergian countenance so absolutely livid. "What?"

The young instructor shook the handful of papers before Hendricks's face.

"This! What's the meaning of this?"

The older man recognized the medical forms he had thrown away a few hours earlier.

"I wondered how you got hold of the campus gossip, Philpott," he said, glaring at the papers instead of the man holding them. "Do you dig through Dean Watson's garbage, too?"

"They were all over the floor of the Fizz-Sci office!"

The bartender appeared and leaned slightly over the counter.

"Dr. Philpott, if you could hold your voice down . . ."

Philpott shot a glance at Sean/Hymie and sat on a stool next to Hendricks. He ordered a beer before turning to the older man.

"You did throw these away?" he asked, quietly now.

"On purpose, not by accident?"

"Yes."

"Why? You've jumped every hurdle so far. You've been strutting around campus like a Rhode Island Red for a year. *Wby?*"

There was only a thin layer of whiskey at the bottom of Hendricks's glass. He held it upside-down over his mouth anyway, until the last few drops fell into his throat like acid rain.

"I changed my mind."

Philpott's jaw dropped so far that Hendricks was reminded of an old woodcut of Marley's Ghost.

"You changed your mind," the younger man repeated. "You changed your mind. I would have *killed* to ride on a Shuttle, but I didn't have the seniority. I didn't know the right people, and I had a dozen black marks against me on the med forms. *Wby*, pray tell, did you change your mind?"

"My outlook is different now," answered Hendricks, gripping his thick-bottomed shot glass as if to crush it. "I'm too old to play Buck Rogers. I'm fed up with all the poking and prodding and nosy questions. And most of all, I don't see the point."

Philpott's beer finally arrived. He sipped it at first as though it were a fine wine.

"The point of what?" he asked through a mustache of foam.

"Of the Shuttle. Of space flight. Of colonizing the planets. Of anything. You've razzed me for years about being a Steady-Statler, Philpott. Well, you'll be happy to know you have a convert. I accept the evidence ARGUS has given us. I accept that the cosmos is of finite age, and that it will one day end."

Hendricks rose and pulled out his wallet. He tossed a couple of bills on the counter.

"I accept that no human endeavor will survive. No art, literature, technology, architecture, or anything else. I accept that nothing much matters. Now, if you will excuse me . . ."

He left Philpott sitting on a stool doing Marley's Ghost again. He glimpsed Sean/Hymie at the counter as the door closed behind him, wiping another goddamn glass with that goddamn rag.

* * *

The wind blew cold, out of the north, as if the jet stream had been turned on him like a fire hose. It welled up his sleeves and trouser legs, it licked him wetly behind the ears, it slapped his face cherry-red. Just the thing to top off this perfect day.

It was dark already. Here, east of the campus, stood tiny houses, normally rented out for a semester at a time to two or three students sharing expenses. Hendricks rented one year-round; he preferred a green lawn to the balcony of an apartment. At least, he used to . . .

"Jer?"

Hendricks glanced around as if lost. He had been on mental cruise control the last few streets.

"Is that you?"

Hendricks peered into the shadows beyond an open garage door. He heard the scrape of rake teeth on concrete and then the click of a switch. Two buzzing fluorescent lights revealed a woman in dungarees, a frayed sweater, and work gloves. Next to her a rake and a shovel lay against the wall.

"Yes, it's me," Hendricks finally answered.

He was not the only instructor to rent one of these cottages. Rebecca Sinclair, from the English Department, lived in one, too. She must have just finished raking the yard. That was like her, lawn-worshiping well into the evening, summer or winter.

She pulled off the leather gloves and tossed them onto a plastic seedling tray. Hendricks wandered closer. The ground seemed to tilt beneath him, like the deck of a ship.

"I tried to call you twice today."

"I was in the Physical Sciences building."

Rebecca's face mirrored her surprise. "On Saturday?"

"I had some things to take care of."

The woman smiled. "Ending a sentence with a preposition. Tut, tut!"

"Sorry."

Rebecca's hair was auburn, with only a hint of grey; a yellow bandanna covered it like a bonnet. She filled out her sweater well for a woman of her age.

Her age? thought Hendricks. She's younger than I am!

There was a moment of silence before Rebecca took up the ball of conversation.

"Well—are you going to stand out in the wind all night or come in where it's warm?"

Hendricks was definitely feeling the effects of the whisky. All of his oratorical skills had drained out with that pretty speech at the Crock o' Gold. He contemplated an evening of trying to converse cleverly with Becky, and his head throbbed with premature hangover.

"Tonight may not be such a good time to visit, Becky," he began lamely.

Rebecca stared at him with even more surprise.

"Saturday night's not a good time? Why? Did you suddenly take up bowling?"

"No. It's just . . . I'm not up to it."

"Is something wrong?" Rebecca asked, edging closer. "Are you ill?"

She raised her hand, as if to feel his brow. Hendricks took a step backwards, which was a mistake. He tripped in a mound of something that yielded with a crackle. He lost his already shaky equilibrium and fell back onto a pile of leaves and twigs.

"Jeremy!"

He stared up at the moon, hazy through clouds. Rebecca's face passed over it like an eclipse.

"Are you all right?"

"Course," he answered. He tried to sit up, but the world tilted, and his head plopped heavily into the dry grass again.

Rebecca helped him to his feet. He tried not to lean on her, but she was so . . . convenient. She gave him a studious look, an elementary teacher's once-over.

"Are you drunk?"

"What makes you say that?"

"That's not Listerine on your breath. Were you celebrating something?"

Hendricks's laugh was not pleasant. "No . . . not celebrating."

Rebecca's frown deepened. "There is something wrong, then. What? You can tell me."

"Everybody's sure nosy tonight. Can't a guy have a drink now and then without the whole world turning inside out? Besides, you'll think it's stupid. You'll get mad because you think it's so stupid. Only it's not stupid."

"If something's bothering you this much, it can't be stupid," Rebecca said seriously. "Please. Come in and tell me."

* * *

He went in. He told her.

They sat facing each other, he on the sofa, she in the armchair opposite. They both held cups of coffee.

"So basically, you've discovered mortality," said Becky. "I reached that stage when I was ten, at my grandmother's funeral. Like lightning out of the blue, I realized I, too, would someday die. Everyone realizes that, sometime. It's the price we pay for being conscious, thinking creatures. But everyone gets over it, too. There's no need to brood on it and spoil the time we do have."

Hendricks nodded impatiently, then he wished he hadn't. A bowl of soup sloshed around where his brain used to be.

"I know all that," he said. His words came out slurred, or maybe his ears weren't working right. "It's more than that. It's the mortality of everyone. Of everything. There doesn't seem to be much point."

"People come to terms with that, as well, Jer," continued Becky, "whether they see it as Ragnarok, or Armageddon, or nuclear winter."

"Do they? Maybe they just don't think about it. Maybe they just blind themselves and hope it doesn't come in their lifetimes."

"Maybe. What else could they do?"

"Nothing," muttered Hendricks. "Nothing at all."

* * *

Hendricks had no idea when he actually fell asleep. Rebecca's voice simply faded, like a radio broadcast as you drive farther and farther from its source, until finally it vanished altogether.

When he awoke, it was dark, save for the wan glow of the porch light that filtered through the curtains. He lay on the couch, fully clothed except for his shoes, which waited on the floor beside him.

He pulled himself up slowly. His head did not feel as bad as he thought it would, but it was still filled with soup.

He glanced at his watch. Past one A.M. He worked his shoes on and stood, one hand against the wall to steady himself. He crept to the door and opened it as softly as he could, though each click and creak echoed like rifle fire in his mind. He stepped out into the cold air of late autumn, which welcomed him back with a slap on the cheek, and he closed the door behind him.

Hendricks tiptoed between the leaf piles as if in a minefield. He wasn't quite sure why he had exited so carefully, like a half-assed car burglar. A few minutes later he clumped heavily up his own front steps.

He scraped the key around until he found the keyhole. Once inside, he wiped his hand over the wall as if finger-painting, searching for the light switch. *Clack.* The sudden glare was a double-barreled laser beam in the eyes.

He managed to reach the bathroom before he vomited. Afterwards he collapsed onto his bed, shoes and all.

* * *

Sunday brought on the hangover proper. He wished the Big Crunch would come, already.

Philpott and Rebecca both called. The phone sounded like a fire alarm each time. Hendricks had no idea what they said, but he sensed questions by the inflection of their voices and replied "Uh-huh," an all-around good answer. It must have satisfied them, because they each finally hung up.

He turned on the TV and switched to PBS. He caught the tail end of something about the comet that killed the dinosaurs.

Appropriate, somehow. No need for dinosaurs any more. He turned it off again.

He peeked into the tiny room off the kitchen, a former pantry that housed his four-foot-long amateur telescope. The telescope stood on its wooden tripod like a Wellsian Martian, blinded by its lens cap. He considered taking it out to the trash, but it wasn't worth the effort. He closed the door and left it to a night without stars.

Hendricks entered the spare bedroom, which served as his library and study. Books lined one wall so thickly that you couldn't tell what color the paint was. Most were reference works on organic chemistry and the like; some were volumes of fiction; one shelf contained *A Field Guide to the Stars and Planets* and similar titles.

He touched his palm to *The Skywatcher's Handbook*, at one end of his astronomy shelf, as if stroking a lover's cheek. Then he shoved with all his might and winced at

the sound of books avalanching onto the floor. He left them where they lay, a tiny Space Mountain of cardboard, paper, and glossy photos.

He sat around, hoping to feel better. He didn't. He still had nothing prepared for tomorrow's classes. He went for a walk.

The clouds and wind were gone today, but it was colder than ever. The sun shone brightly, with the crystal clarity it usually reserved for truly frigid dead-of-winter days.

He marched across the campus and through a park full of empty swings and picnic tables. At three P.M. he began looking for someplace to eat, though he was not particularly hungry. The only shop open was something called Deppity Dawg, which had a sign showing the cartoon canine holding a huge chili dog. It did not appeal to Hendricks, but he went in.

The chili on his hot dog was old, a deep brick red not far from black. He couldn't force down half of it.

After he got home, his lungs burning with the cold air, Rebecca called again. He put on a smile like a mask, and the cheerful tone of his voice might have come from an unseen ventriloquist.

"No, no, I'm fine. A touch of mid-life crisis, I guess—inevitable at the half-century mark."

His true thoughts writhed behind the words like a harpooned octopus. When Rebecca finally hung up, his happy veneer shattered like glass.

The cold sun set early. He watched it as if it were the last sunset, ever. There had been times when he thought of Rebecca Sinclair as Mrs. Rebecca Hendricks . . . but no more. Why ruin two lives?

He found the .32 in the drawer near his bed and the bullets on the closet shelf, which he realized in retrospect to be an incredibly inept arrangement—as if a burglar would sit and play solitaire while he ran around trying to load the damn thing.

He hefted the revolver in one hand, like it was a snowball aching to be thrown, and carried it into his study. He stared down at the books on the floor, then he looked over his desk.

He had not written word one of his lecture, and he wouldn't have time to requisition anything from Audio-Visual . . . but perhaps his students would have something interesting to see tomorrow, anyway. He always liked to leave his class with an eye-opener on the last day. Mr. Moore would have to settle for his A that was too low. Dr. Philpott would have to look elsewhere for a surrogate astronaut. And Rebecca—well, she'd get over it.

* * *

Hendricks strode across the campus purposefully the next morning, despite the sweat that trickled down his neck. The gun hidden in his valise pulsed like an anchor. He was sure everyone around him had developed X-ray vision, and his heart leapt whenever anybody glanced in his direction.

He was relieved to enter the Physical Sciences building, with its thick, dark, bomb-shelter walls. He visited the men's room and splashed cold water on his face, then went to his classroom.

Philpott had the same room from seven A.M. 'til eight-

fifteen, then it stood empty until Hendricks's first class at nine. The clock on the wall, behind its catcher's mask of wire, read eight-forty. At least twenty more minutes of sweating.

He set his briefcase on the desk as he would any morning. The blackboard was covered with Philpott's arcane drawings, the largest of which was some sort of graph. Hendricks snorted at it and looked for an eraser. Never could find the damn things when you needed them.

"Not too impressed by my artwork, huh?"

Hendricks spun as if hit by a spotlight. Philpott sat like a gnome in a grade-school-sized desk in the corner.

"I—I need room for my notes," said Hendricks at last. "Have you been there since eight-fifteen?"

"I've been around. Come in every so often to admire my handiwork."

"A bit conceited this morning, aren't we?" Hendricks asked. He looked back at the marks on the blackboard, really looked, for the first time. "What were you doing today, anyway?"

"Rather ironic, really," said the younger instructor.

"The big one. Beginning, expansion, contraction, end of the universe. Got the idea Saturday night at the Crock o' Gold."

Hendricks grumbled. He examined the graph, which featured a large parabola.

"What's this?"

"Your favorite. Size of the universe from Big Bang to Big Crunch. 'X' is its age in billions of years. 'Y' is its radius in megaparsecs."

Hendricks looked closer. A vertical line near the left edge of the graph cut off a tiny sliver of the parabola. The professor touched his finger to it.

"And this line?"

"That's where we are now."

Hendricks yanked his finger away as if burnt.

"But that's—that's hardly anything!"

Philpott bent forward and leaned against the desktop.

"Well, what did you think, J. Q.? That the universe was on its last legs already?"

Hendricks stared mutely at the younger man, like a boy confronted with a window he's broken.

Philpott tapped himself on the head.

"Use your greymatter, man! They first decided the universe was expanding because of the red shift of the galaxies. If we were even at the halfway point, there wouldn't be any red shift!"

Hendricks turned back and stared at the simple chalk figure. Philpott was right. It was obvious, but it had never occurred to him.

"The universe isn't old and decrepit, J. Q., not by a long shot."

Hendricks touched the chalkboard again. He could cover the segment representing the age of the universe with three fingers.

"How far back does recorded history go? Six, seven thousand years? That's a hell of a long time. Sumeria, Babylon, Egypt, Mohenjo-Daro—you can almost smell mummy dust when you hear those names. Think of the long centuries between them and now—time creeping

past Crete and Greece and Rome, past the birth of Christ into the Dark Ages, past Charlemagne, the Norman Conquest, and the Black Death, past Columbus, the Renaissance, the American Revolution, the Civil War, the World Wars, to the present."

Philpott rose and spread his arms.

"And how long have men been on Earth? Two million years? Three? Think of that period between Sumeria and here, multiplied dozens of times, to equal the existence of humanity as a species. And we're newcomers, J. Q. That twenty thousand centuries of our existence must itself be multiplied thirty times just to reach back to the *end* of the dinosaurs. And life was old, even then.

"There was an Age of Fish before the Age of Reptiles, and an Age of Invertebrates before that, and an era of unicellular life longer than all the others put together. And the empty Earth existed eons before any life at all.

"Think yourself back to the beginning of our Earth and Sun. Think how long ago that was, and then remember that the Sun is young as stars go. Before Sol was even an accretion disk, stars had been born, had traveled the long path of stellar evolution, and had died. And before those, another generation of stars lived out its billion-year existence.

"Imagine how long it's been since the beginning, J. Q., if you can. Then look at my chart. All those ages, all those geological epochs fit into that first couple of inches. The universe isn't old, J. Q. It's barely out of its infancy!"

Hendricks felt for the chair at his desk like a blind man. He dropped into it without taking his eyes from the blackboard.

"We've come a long way in a hundred years, J. Q. In another hundred, we wouldn't recognize the place. In a thousand, we might turn black holes inside out for fun. In a million, we'll probably repeal the Laws of Thermodynamics by popular vote, and if our universe gets too tight, we'll step into the Fifth Dimension and find a bigger one. Just give us a chance, Professor Hendricks. We're like the universe. We've barely begun."

Hendricks turned his head slowly towards the young instructor. Philpott was leaning against the wall, sweat collecting like dew in his hair and beard.

Both men started in surprised as the sound of clapping hands filled the classroom. Three of Hendricks's students clogged the doorway. Lord knew how long they had been listening, but now they were giving Philpott a standing ovation. The young instructor pushed himself away from the wall and howled.

Hendricks numbly pulled a sheet of paper and a marker from his desk. He scribbled, "No Class Today—Read Ch. 14 of Milleson and Rheinhardt for Wednesday," and taped the message to the door. Then he left.

* * *

Philpott's words echoed time and again through Hendricks's head on the way home. The cosmos was young—billions of years old, yet still young. It was incredible. Mind-boggling.

He entered his rented cottage and set his valise on the kitchen table. He began removing the papers he had haphazardly stuffed into it earlier. His fingers closed upon

something heavy and metallic and cold, and he yanked his hand out as if he'd grabbed a snake.

After a minute to work up his nerve, he pulled out the .32 and carried it to the bedroom drawer whence it came. The phone rang just as he slammed the drawer shut, and he almost collapsed from shock.

He ran to the den and snatched up the receiver. It was Rebecca.

"Are you okay, Jer?"

"Uh . . . yes. Why do you ask?"

Rebecca paused. Hendricks could almost feel her embarrassment.

"Well, you usually teach a class at this time, but I noticed you walking past just now with another glass-eyed look, and I wondered . . ."

Hendricks laughed, and this time it was not an unpleasant sound.

"No, Rebecca, I'm all right. As a matter of fact, today I do feel like a celebration. I'm sorry I was such a pain in the butt the other night. How about I take you out to dinner to make up for it? The Cosmopolitan, maybe. Say I pick you up around eight?"

Now Hendricks imagined a smile blossoming on her face.

"That's a wonderful idea, Jer! I'll be ready!"

* * *

He had several things to do before evening arrived. He drove back to the Physical Sciences building. Philpott's office was empty, but he found what he wanted on top of the astronomy instructor's desk: the forms he had torn in half on Saturday and tried to throw away. They had already been matched up correctly and taped together. He wondered what the NASA officials would think when they saw them.

Hendricks entered his own office and pawed through his desk until he found a letter postmarked the eighteenth. He grinned wickedly as he switched on his word processor.

Dear Mr. Moore:

About your note concerning the mid-term exam grades given out on Wednesday last . . .

Woodworth's Fine Jewels wanted five hundred dollars just for the down payment, but Hendricks shelled it out without batting an eye. He had the ring in his pocket when he picked up Becky.

He popped the question during dinner. She said yes.

* * *

Late that night, they called Philpott on Becky's phone.

"How'd you like to be second best man?" asked Hendricks.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," answered Philpott.

"By the way, J. Q., you seem a bit more chipper than you did this morning."

"You missed your calling, Philpott," said Hendricks.

"You should've been a shrink—or maybe a preacher."

"Naw . . . I couldn't stand listening to a bunch of neurotic Yuppies on my couch all week. And I play golf on Sundays."

* * *

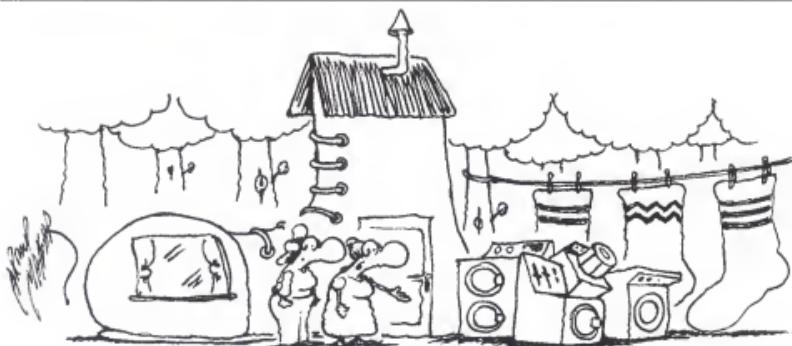
Hendricks left Becky's at three A.M. He hopscotched home, and his whistling started the neighbors' collie to barking.

When he reached his own yard, he stared up at the clear, cold, black canopy of the sky. Somewhere up there the Space Telescope orbited this mudball, its sensitive eyes turned carefully away from the sun. Beyond ARGUS spun the planets, and beyond them burned the stars, beckoning like lighthouses on distant shores.

"I still feel as old as the universe," whispered Hendricks to the darkness. "Or, rather, I feel as *young* as the universe."

He stepped up onto his porch, then he turned for a last look at the stars.

"We've barely begun. Like the universe itself. We've barely begun." ♦



"I keep finding these odd dryers in my socks."

Uncertainty and the Dread Word Love

Eric T. Baker

1

In the fall of 1926, there were ten of us doing graduate work in chemistry at Balliol College. We were a quiet lot, part of the first generation to pass through Oxford who had not fought in the Great War. We did not have the survivors' wildness, rather we shared the country's sense of the worst being past. The dons certainly felt secure again in their comforts, and the undergraduates were beginning to think maybe they did have a future to preserve.

It was in this atmosphere of restored order that my life suffered two disruptions. The first was Jane; the second was Heisenberg.

Despite being enrolled at St. Hilda's College, Jane had earned her degree by attending the chemistry seminars at Balliol. At the time, it was a rare but not unheard of expedient for allowing women to earn technical degrees that the women's colleges were unequipped to provide. The arrangement had been facilitated for Jane by her grandfather, a fellow of our college. When she took a first, a graduate slot was held for her without her grandfather even having to ask.

Jane's hair was blonde and

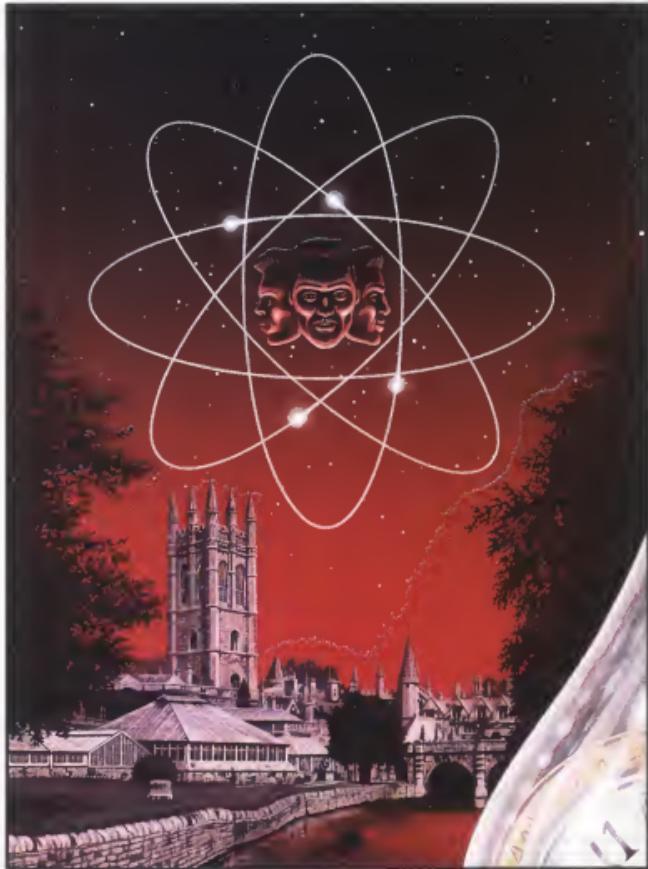


Illustration by Timothy Weston

worn unfashionably long. Her blouses and jumpers gave her too much bust. Out of class, she seemed always to be with some rower or lord. As an undergraduate, I never shared a seminar with Jane, so I knew only these surface things about her. Worse, I made an unkind assumption about her reasons for attending Oxford and dismissed her from my thoughts. Only when Jane came back to work in the graduate labs did I realize that I had been unfair.

We accepted Jane gratefully into our little society. I would like to say that we welcomed her out of respect for her scientific gifts, but it really had more to do with our starvation for feminine contact. Only two of our ten were married. Charlie usually had a girl, but I was typical of the rest of us. In the five years I was at Oxford, I poled exactly two women down the river, and one of those was Jane.

There was a storage room at the end of the hall of chemistry labs, a narrow space full of used and unused equipment with only one window, that we appropriated as a sort of graduate lounge. It was too warm when the fall term started and too cold by the time it ended, but it had counters long enough to nap on and stools enough to seat everyone at tea time.

Those first few tea times in the storage room were when I came to know Jane. It was also at those teas that we first discussed Werner Heisenberg's latest folly, his uncertainty principle. The previous year Heisenberg had been one of Bohr's disciples, preaching the doctrine of quantum mechanics, a terrifying blend of relativity and matrix algebra. Fortunately, before any of us were forced to dust off our algebra texts, Erwin Schrödinger published his matter wave theory. It duplicated Bohr's matrix results by using differential equations, calculations that were much simpler and more familiar to us.

Now Heisenberg was back with a theory of his own, a crazy idea that the world of the atom could never be accurately measured. It was a direct assault on the order that my generation was just finding by approaching chemistry in atomic terms. Macroscopic work (like Jane's on cellophane, the recent American import) would have been the norm at the turn of the century. Now we discussed electrons and elements as our dows had discussed molecules and compounds in their graduate days.

Our frame of reference had shifted, but our viewpoint had not. We still believed in causality. We believed that if you knew an electron's position and velocity, you could calculate its position and velocity at any point in the future, assuming you also knew all the external conditions. Now Heisenberg was claiming you could never know an electron's position and velocity exactly. It was as if someone had tried to convince our dows that combining two molecules of hydrogen with one of oxygen had only a chance of producing water.

2

Like Sleeping Beauty, I awakened and fell in love.

"Sorry," Jane said. "Would you like to go down to the pub?"

"Humm?" Having rolled off a countertop during a nap early in the term, I hadn't managed a deep sleep in the

storeroom since. It was waking up to brown eyes under painted eyelashes that had me befuddled.

"Sorry, but you're the only one around, and I'm dying for a drink. Are you terribly busy?" At tea, Jane had been wearing a cardigan and a wool skirt under her lab coat. Now she had her hair loose and was wearing a pale blue dress. At tea she had smelt of ether, and now she smelled like lilacs.

"No," I said, sitting up and reaching for my glasses. Why did Jane want me to take her to a pub? I wondered, and then my mind finally awakened. "They won't serve you."

"Not if I'm alone; damn provincial landlords."

"Quite." I was spending my evening recording precipitates. I weighed the time it would take to repeat the experiment against this unexpected chance to be alone with Jane. It wasn't a hard choice. "I'd be honored to escort you."

"Marvelous," she said. I'd been using my jacket for a pillow, so now I unbuttoned it and followed her out.

In my third year, I had met a girl, Lisa, at an afternoon lecture on Dickens. In a fit of drunken courage, I had asked her to a concert. A week after the concert, I had taken her out on the river, and the following week we'd spent a frustrating Saturday afternoon in my rooms. That was all, end of romance, although we did still trade greetings when we passed one another in town.

That first night in the pub, Jane touched me more than Lisa had on all three of those occasions combined. We sat side by side at a back table, and Jane punctuated her stories with a hand laid on my arm or leg. For one delicious quarter of an hour she sat with her ankle hooked around mine, until I was sent off again for another round of ale.

After the first round, Jane made me tip the barman into drawing full pints for her, instead of the half ones usually poured for women. Jane drank more to less visible effect than any person I had ever met. I made no effort to keep up with her. She had been drinking back at her rooms before she came to me, and it was while exploring this that I discovered Tony.

Given my undergraduate memories of Jane, I should not have been shocked to learn she had a boyfriend. Still, she had never mentioned him at tea, and to the moment she spoke his name, I had thought I was "doing very well" with her.

"He's reading law," Jane said as I tried to hide my disappointment. "He's only in his second year. I feel a little like a cradle robber." She got another cigarette from her case, I extended my lighter and was pleased to discover I could hold it steady.

"Where's he tonight?"

"Studying." She blew smoke at the ceiling. "His rooms are in the college, and he doesn't like to hear curfew as much as I'd like him to."

"Where's he from?"

"Yorkshire. His father's got a practice in a town up there. We're supposed to go up at the break."

"Well, that explains his not slipping out. They have an unhealthy respect for the rules in Yorkshire."

"Yes." She smiled at me as if I'd said something particularly brilliant. Her hand was on my wrist when she asked, "Where are you from?"

"Wales. I sit before you as the black sheep in three generations of proud military service. My father fought the Boer, and was on the General Staff in the War. My brother served in Egypt."

"So you know something about rules."

"More than anyone should have to." Jane took her hand away, and I used the opportunity to get out a cigarette of my own.

"Actually, there's more to it," Jane said. "We had a bit of a row."

"About?"

Jane took a drink from her pint and held it up. "I wanted to go out. You know. He doesn't approve."

"Hardly for him to say."

"I suppose." And that was the end of Tony for the night, but we stayed on the subject of her drinking and going out. That led us to the story of Jane's girlhood in London.

Jane had been sixteen when her parents were divorced. The tension between her parents had made her insist on a boarding school a year before that. She spent summers and breaks with friends or in rooming houses, modeling when her parents wouldn't give her money. The summer she was seventeen, there'd been an older man who had found her jobs and kept her in groceries, apparently in hopes of favors that Jane never granted.

"Never?" I asked. It was too forward a question, but I was amazed by the candor of the revelations to that point. I was also well past my two-pint limit.

"Never. There was one night when he had too much to drink, and he tried to force things. I kicked him so hard that his driver had to carry him to his coach." There was a certain satisfaction in her voice as she said this. "He was in bed for three days, but he apologized to me."

Jane was proud of her scientific skills. A career in chemistry did not fit her father's vision of his daughter's future. Despite her grandfather, it had taken two years to convince her father that she should be allowed to pursue it. Similar prejudice made her seek a graduate degree. Only at a university did she have a chance of doing work equal to her abilities. In business, she would have ended up washing bottles.

When I finally fell into bed at my digs that night, I was happier than I'd been in a long time. I was disappointed that there was a Tony, but I didn't let that stand in the way of my love. That Jane and I were not going to be lovers only made it that much easier to be friends. That's what I felt as I drifted off to sleep that night: that I had made a new and very good friend.

3

"But it's just common sense really," John said. "To observe an electron, you have to touch it with something equally small. When the two particles touch, energy is going to transfer and the electron is going to react in an unknown direction."

"It seems obvious, I agree, if you accept Heisenberg's reasoning, which not everyone does."

It was a Wednesday night in October, another day of teaching first-year labs was at an end, and one of the bright-

er lights had stayed behind to pull my beard. In Brussels, Heisenberg had just departed from that year's Solvay Congress in triumph, most of the greatest names in physics bowing to his principle. John had been smitten by Heisenberg as hadly as I had been smitten by Jane, and he was having just as much trouble rationalizing his feelings.

"How can you not accept it? It's so straightforward." John's naivete was touching, but annoying. I began to understand the dons' attitudes. The students were so wrong about so much, you began to wish they would just shut up.

"Have you thought about what this theory means? Isn't one implication that the results of an observation depend on how it is made? Our role as scientists is to observe reality and report on it objectively. Heisenberg's principle means that there is no object reality to observe." John was wearing that expression that I'd worn myself when I'd thought some teacher was being tiresomely doctrinaire. I immediately felt guilty, but hid it with a long suffering sigh.

"All right," I said. "We're supposed to match spectrums next week; I believe you can do that. Can you argue the other side? Take the week and really think about Heisenberg's principle. I don't expect you to actually disprove it, just show me that you've done more than read a journal."

"A thought experiment?" John asked. "One that shows a way to measure an electron's position and velocity?"

"That would be perfect, as long as it is one that has not already been published."

"And if I do prove Heisenberg wrong?" John asked.

"Do I get credit when we publish?"

"If you prove Heisenberg wrong in one week, yours will be the only name on the paper," I promised him. He went away happy: I caught myself hoping that he would think of something new. I'd been struggling with the principle all term. At this point, even being upstaged by an undergraduate seemed preferable to Heisenberg's ideas.

I stopped by the storage room to trade my lab coat for my suit jacket. Jane was inside the room, drinking from a beaker. We kept the "emergency rations" in a bottle labeled formaldehyde, and Jane had it down. She was wearing slacks and a white satin shirt. Under them, her body was tense and hunched with anger. Her hand shook as she refilled the beaker from the bottle. It took no genius to know there had been another fight.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"He hit me," Jane said. "He's got no right to do that." I went to her and tried to take her in my arms. She pushed me away. I was left with only the lilac scent of her perfume.

"Just once?" I said. "Where? Are you all right?"

"I said I was going out," Jane said. "He had reading, but I'd done a lot today. I just wanted to go out." She rubbed her wrist.

"He hit you because you were leaving?"

Jane's face was narrow without being pinched. It made her eyes look big, and that lent her an air of vulnerability. "He grabbed me. He was yelling. Who does he think he is? Who am I that he can grab me?" She turned those eyes on me, demanding an answer.

"He hit you or he grabbed you?" I asked.

"He grabbed my wrist. He wouldn't let go. I just wanted to go out. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." As the term had progressed, I had come to understand the pressures that Jane and Tony's relationship was under. It was as I might have guessed from that first night. In his youthful arrogance (which I found even more annoying than John's), Tony always thought he knew best. His middle-class Yorkshire upbringing had trained him to view Jane's drinking as dangerous and immoral, a crime like adultery or usury.

Jane had always drunk, though. When she was in London, her friends were the models and photographers and painters with whom she worked. Drinking was just a part of their lives. At Oxford, it was still a way of life among the people she met, until she came to us.

"Do you need a place to stay?" I asked. "If he's going to get violent, maybe you shouldn't be where he can find you."

"He's not violent," Jane said. She looked as if she might cry. "It's not his fault. He just . . . you know."

"He just doesn't respect you." She'd set down her empty beaker and was reaching for a cigarette. She paused midway to rub her arm. An unwanted pang of honesty struck me and I said, "I wish you'd leave him."

That made her look at me, but only for a moment. "No. How could I do that? I love Tony, and he's right. I shouldn't be doing this. It's stupid." She sat down on one of the white lab stools and tapped her cigarette on the case. "Sometimes I just want to, though."

"Sure," I said. The honesty had passed and I could agree with reasoning like that. It was a new form of the drinking argument that had come out of their spending the term break with Tony's parents. Before, Jane had defended her right to do as she pleased. Now she flogged herself for being "bad."

I refilled Jane's beaker and got down one of my own. "Tony's just wrong," I said. "It doesn't interfere with your work, it doesn't get you in trouble, and you can afford it. Alcohol's like any chemical; some people have a higher tolerance than others. Tony just doesn't understand how high your tolerance is."

This was true. In my few nights of pub crawling with Jane, I had learned that "touchiness" was the only indicator of how drunk Jane was, and even that depended on her mood. She had to be basically relaxed and happy to hold your hand and stare into your eyes. There had been none of these moments since she returned from the break.

"Why do you put up with me?" Jane asked.

This was a question that had also become routine since the break. "I've told you. I don't put up with you. I . . . like you. Respect your right to live your life. Tony won't be happy until he changes you to suit himself."

"It's not like that." Jane was concentrating on the ashtray, a horrible white ceramic souvenir from Brighton, carefully rolling the ash from her cigarette. "You don't know. Tony is so good to me in so many ways. We love each other. You don't know how rare that is."

I took a deep breath and pushed three generations of military reserve aside. "I love you."

Again I'd surprised her into looking at me. She smiled. "I love you too."

The words should have flushed me with pleasure from head to toe, but I could hear in her voice that we meant

two different things. "I'm glad," I said and sat down on a stool. There was obviously going to be no need to rush to her arms. I must have sounded bitter when I added, "I'm glad we can be friends, but I do wish you would leave Tony."

"Andrew."

"All right. Sorry. Did you want to go out, then?"

"Definitely." We got busy clearing away the rations and gathering up our jackets.

"By the way," I said, "Shaw's coming up Saturday to lecture on Dickens. Do you want to come along?"

"I'd like to, but I'll have to see what Tony's doing."

"Fine," I said. "Let me know."

4

Jane did not accompany me to the Shaw lecture. I went with Charlie, whom I asked even before I heard back from Jane. I had learned that "seeing what Tony is doing" was code for "no." Shaw lectured on how Dickens could be reinterpreted in terms of Socialist doctrine. The lecture made me look at some of my favorite characters in a wholly new light, which distressed me. I left wishing I'd stayed at home.

It was two weeks before I saw Jane alone again. At the time I flattered myself that I was avoiding her, but that was just vanity. Between my classes and my research, there was not much variation I could introduce into my schedule. I skipped some tea times, but Jane could have seen me whenever the mood struck her. Knowing this made me all the more bitter when she didn't seek me out.

I had not been lying when I told Jane that I was glad to be her friend. I was glad. She was a good and modern person who shared my interests. She laughed at my jokes and told some good ones of her own. She was easy to look at. What more could you want in a friend?

What Tony had.

That first night with Jane, I was sorry I had not met her sooner, at least before she found Tony. I compared her openness and physical freedom very favorably with Lisa's reserve. As time passed and I came to know Jane better, I began to be wistful for Lisa. At least we had come to an understanding and moved on. Jane's willingness to hold hands and rub shoulders, being so close to her and yet so far, became an unbearable frustration.

British reserve also had a hand in the humiliation I felt at having declared my love. "Love" was a dire word in my family and class. It was a trump card, played only in the most awful and serious moments. My mother whispered it to my brother when he left for Egypt. My father would have strangled on it. I had blurted it to Jane, but I had meant it. Her light acceptance of it crushed me even more in retrospect.

So there I was in my lab, still sulking two weeks later when Jane appeared in a white dress, carrying a picnic basket. "Let's go out on the river," she said by way of hello. It was one of those beautiful Indian summer Saturdays in November that happen every few years at Oxford. If you stayed in the sun, it would be warm enough for a river ride, but the boats were already locked up for the season. I pointed this out.

"Reggie's lending us his," Jane explained, and that seemed to settle things. I put my anger aside for later use, turned out my fires, picked up my jacket, and followed her to the river.

After our first night in a pub, I rank that afternoon on the river as the second best time I ever had with Jane. She had brought three bottles of wine, and I finished at least one by myself. I became so drunk that I found myself discussing my sexual experiences.

Today, my students would rather describe their orgasms to me in intimate detail than give me a straight explanation of Heisenberg's principle or Planck's constant. Before that afternoon, I would have sworn that I would rather accept Heisenberg publicly as my lord and savior than discuss my sex life with anyone. And yet there I was.

Jane laughed at my stories of the beach holidays with my cousins, the clandestine views, the stolen touches, the bartered-for kisses.

"You mean you've never had just a regular girlfriend?" Jane asked after I told the story of my late-night swim with a girl (two years my junior) I'd met on the boardwalk.

"I've been in public schools since I was eleven. There were never any girls about." It was hard for Jane to understand. She'd had her first boyfriend when she was fifteen. She told me stories that had less to do with physical contact than they did different expectations.

"I dated Rob during my last summer in London before coming here," Jane said. "By August, he had our lives planned. He was going to support us writing stories. We'd live in a townhouse and do the rounds of the city until we needed more space for the children. I kept telling him I wanted my degree and an income of my own, but I don't think he ever heard me."

Jane paused to take a drag on her cigarette. The remains of lunch were in the basket, and I was putting us back up to Reg's landing. Jane was reclining in the bow, looking at the bank as she talked. "He's working in an insurance house now. He still writes me these long letters. What we'll do when I come back. Where we'll go. How he'll start writing stories again."

"Have you told him about Tony?"

I winced at having spoken the name, but she didn't seem to notice. "Yes. He considers it a fling I'm having."

Since the damage was done and I was drunk enough to hope, I asked, "Where is Tony?"

Jane flipped her cigarette butt into the water. "At the legal review office. He was dragooned into copy editing at the last minute. I originally borrowed the boat for him."

My anger, which I thought I'd left in the lab, was suddenly with me again. I let the boat coast for a moment while I got a (loose, drunken) grip on myself. Jane lit another cigarette. Around her first drag, she said, "Charlie tells me you might not be back next term."

This was what came of talking to your friends and then missing tea times. Reluctantly, I said, "Perhaps. I'm considering making my family happy and taking a commission after all."

"You're going into the army?" I glanced down from the horizon in time to see that she really was surprised.

"Perhaps. I'd do a year overseas to 'get the feel' — I

said this in the Etonian clip of the brigadier—"and then they'll assign me to Salisbury plain. Not a bad living really, spending your days making bigger and better explosions."

"I don't understand. Why not finish your degree? Why throw your work away?" Jane had worked to get where she was; it was a fair question for her to ask. I decided to give her an honest answer.

"A student of mine presented me with a thought experiment." I fished one of the empty wine bottles from the bottom of the boat and handed it to her. "Put a clock in that bottle and then fill it with free electrons. Imagine the clock is connected to a mechanism that opens the bottle just long enough and just wide enough to emit one electron. Weigh the bottle before and after the electron escapes. Now you know the electron's position and energy at a fixed point and time without the uncertainty measuring it directly would introduce."

While delivering this lecture, I had been getting out a cigarette of my own. As I paused to light it, Jane hefted the bottle and said, "So Heisenberg is wrong?"

"No." I let out a smoke-filled sigh. "It took me almost a week to realize what was wrong with the boy's bottle experiment. Relativity. The clock's reading depends on the gravity it is in. When the electron leaves the bottle, it changes the gravity field. Not very much, but enough to introduce an element of uncertainty into the electron's position."

"So Heisenberg is right. What difference does it make?"

"As long as you're experimenting on cellophane or blowing up bunkers, none. If you want to get at the heart of things, push right at the frontier of science, then it makes a world of difference." Jane watched while I exhaled another round cloud of smoke. The breeze was gone, and the cigarette smoke hung between us. "Atoms are the frontier. Heisenberg has proved that the frontier is not a real place. It is just clouds of probability. Could you be happy working in the clouds? I don't think I can."

Jane stared at me, blinked, then used the bottle to wave the smoke from between us. She held it out to me and said, "Fine. Now tell me why you're really leaving."

I took the bottle and tossed it in the river. Lisa would have left things at Heisenberg. Did I love or hate Jane for giving me these moments of honesty? "I love you," I said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"When was the last time we did something besides go to a pub?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Besides tea times and the nights you're mad at Tony, when do I see you?"

"Do you have a point, or are you just going to keep asking questions?"

"If you really loved me, you wouldn't shut me out of your life."

"Shut you out?" Jane obviously had not thought about this in the same terms I had. She seemed surprised and angry. "What have I kept from you? What have you shared with me?"

"That's not what I mean. If you cared for me half as much as I cared for you . . ."

Jane was looking at me as if she had never seen me be-

fore. "If you care so much about me, why didn't you help me stop drinking?"

It was my turn to be surprised. "Stop? I never heard you say you wanted to stop. All I heard was that Tony didn't like it. That's not the same thing."

Jane opened her mouth to say something, closed it long enough to take a drag on her cigarette, and then said, "I can't believe you're going to join the army because of me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to say these things. It's just . . . remember that guy who supported you when you moved out of your mum's?"

"Eliot?"

"Yeah. And your last boyfriend in London? The one who still writes you the long letters?"

"Rob."

"Yes. I can't be like them. I won't stay here waiting for you to change your mind."

"Change my mind? About Tony?" Jane sat back, a smile of comprehension spreading on her face. "Love, huh? You mean lovers. Well, don't wait for that, because it's never going to happen." She shook her head. "I can't believe you've put up with me just for that."

"I didn't put up with you. I was your friend. I am your friend, but I do want to be more. I can't pretend that I don't. I can't pretend that Heisenberg is wrong. I can't stay here another term."

"That is so incredibly stupid, it isn't even funny."

"It isn't stupid or funny to me."

"I know, but it should be."

It was a pretty quiet trip after that. When we talked, it was to share inane observations, like strangers left alone at a garden party. We returned the boat and still I could not let go. I insisted on walking her to her rooms.

On the steps of her boarding house, she stopped and turned to face me. There was a strange, serious smile on her face. "Don't give up your life for me, Andrew," she said. "I'm not worth it." And then she leaned forward and kissed me (lightly, briefly) on the lips. And then she went up the stairs and through her door.

In the end, I took her advice. The brigadier was very disappointed, as was my father, but I would never have been happy in the army. It would have been flogging myself for failing to win Jane's love. If we didn't agree about her worthiness, at least we agreed that I should be fair to myself.

Unfortunately, I could not do that at Oxford. That whole day on the river demonstrated that. I would see Jane every day, and on those occasions when she wanted me, I would go. Afterwards I would reproach myself, but when I was with her, I would always hope. Jane was not Lisa; there was no way to make a separate peace with her.

So I went to Germany. I wrote up John's bottle experiment (giving him the credit) and my reasoning for its failure and sent them to Heisenberg. He was taking over the physics chair at the University of Leipzig in February. He wrote back, inviting both of us to join him there. John demurred (his parents might have disowned him if he'd gone), but I packed the same day I got Heisenberg's letter. If I was going to spend my days working in the clouds, I wanted to do it at their center.

Charlie kept me supplied with the news of the old gang. I had just taken my master's when he sent me the news of Jane's engagement to Tony. I was still a year from returning to England when Charlie wrote to say that the engagement was off. I would like to say that it didn't affect me, but it did.

I had spent many quiet moments over the years, dreaming about what I would do if Jane suddenly had her freedom. It was with some disgust that I became aware of myself standing with Charlie's half-read letter in my hand. I'd been trying to decide whether to write first, or whether to just go straight to England. Shaking my head at myself, I put on a pot of tea and sat down in my window to finish reading the letter.

Heisenberg had discovered that the world was only probability. The rest of us proved it every day. You could put people in the proper orbits, but the chemistry would not always work. I had a master's to prove that the end of causality was not the death of science. There was life in uncertainty. Was it enough? Sitting in the big picture window of my German flat, I found that my feeling changed every time I tried to measure it. ♦

Jimi Plays Dead

Bruce Bethke

Sheldon Levine called the council of war in a backstage dressing room after the concert in Philadelphia. "You know what our idiot has done this time?" he said by way of calling the meeting to order.

"Made the covers of *Time*, *People*, and *Rolling Stone*!" Beverly McKinney crowed. "We beat Springsteen's record!"

"Beverly, my dear," Sheldon said to the PR manager in the tone he knew infuriated her most, "you obviously have not read the articles in question." He picked up the copy of *Time* and tilted his head back to look through the bottoms of his bifocals. "I quote: 'His fans call him The New Jimi Hendrix, although many critics disagree and Buzz Taylor himself is more modest. 'I figure I'm like 90 percent there,'" Taylor says, adding, "I'd

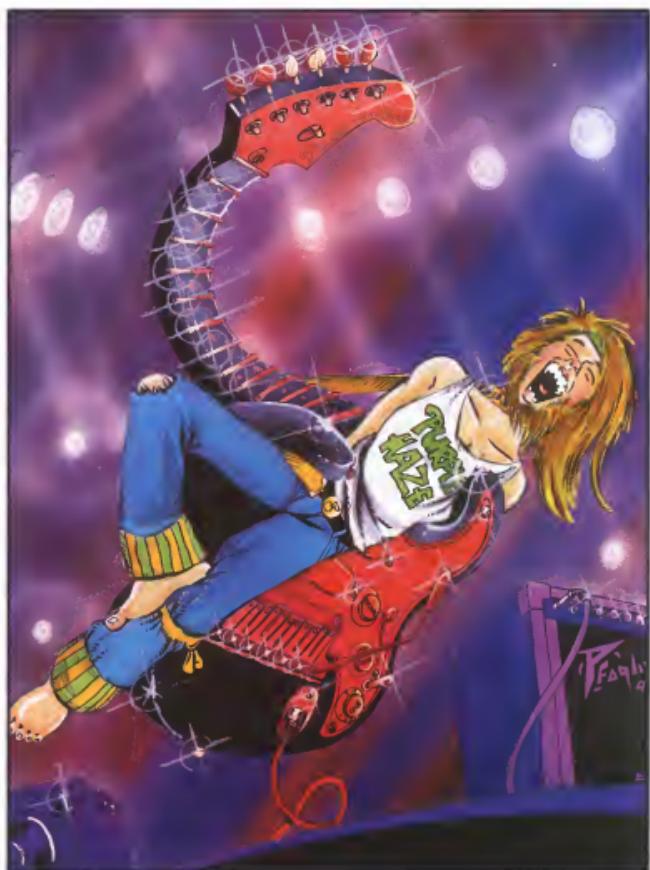


Illustration by Phil Foden

give my left nut to have that last 10 percent. I think the problem is my equipment. It's not like there's anything wrong with my playing, y'know?"

"Jesus Christ on crutches," Rickie the audio engineer growled, as he buried his bearded face in his hands and began sliding under the table. "It is *not* the equipment."

"Wait. It gets better." Sheldon dropped the *Time* and picked up the *Rolling Stone*. "Dave Wetland quotes our boy as saying, 'I figure like, Hendrix's old concert rig is out there somewhere, right? If I could find it, I'd buy it instantly. Wouldn't even ask the price.'"

Beverly went pale. "Not again."

"What's the problem?" Denny LeBreck asked. He'd signed on as road manager a month before the tour started and so was still quite innocent.

"The problem," Sheldon pointed out, "is now every shyster in North America is going to be trying to sell our boy old electric junk. Last time Buzz said something like this we had guys with broken, half-burned guitars crawling out of the goddam *woodwork*. Some guy in Ohio even climbed through Buzz's eighth-floor hotel window with a Stratocaster he said was the original one used in *Jimi Plays Berkeley*."

Rickie surfaced briefly. "Buzz bought that guitar. Ten thousand bucks, cash advance from the company AmEx account. Then he gave it to me and told me to make it playable again. Hell, it wasn't playable when it was *new*. It was a cheap Japanese copy with a neck like a longbow!" Rickie went back to sulking.

"So what do we do?" LeBreck asked.

"You, Mr. LeBreck," Sheldon paused, and pointed, "are going to tell your crew that nobody—*nobody*—talks to Buzz without a press pass. If someone shows up with used amplifiers to sell, you have my permission to run them over. Use the forklift."

Sheldon turned to the PR manager. "Beverly, my dear! Can you get out a damage-control press release? *Today*?" Beverly bristled and shot Sheldon a glare that would've peeled paint.

Sheldon pursed his lips, as if afraid of what he had to say next. "Rickie—"

"Yes, I'm sure there's no little detail I've missed," the audio engineer grumbled. "For the thirtieth time: I have duplicated Hendrix's guitar down to the capacitors on the tone pots. It's got the same strings, the same tailpiece, the same tuning machines, the same damn *everything* Hendrix used. The same high-loss cables. The same scratchy wah-wah pedal. The same maximum hiss fuzztone. I even found some old Burgess batteries for the gadgets. We've got the same speaker coils and cones, the same model-year amplifiers, and before we left L.A. I personally henched tested one hundred sets of 6L6 power tubes to find the four best—"

"Okay," Sheldon conceded, "we've been through this before. It's not the equipment; it's Buzz. So what do we do about him?"

Beverly leaned forward: "Let's hypnotize him into believing that he really *is* Hendrix. I know this psychic nutritionist in L.A. who can—"

"Nah," Sheldon said, shaking his head. "It'd be like try-

ing to hypnotize a brick. Besides, sooner or later he'd notice that his hands are the wrong color."

LeBreck looked around nervously. "Ah, one of the scaffolding apes has some pills that make you think you're God. If you think it'd help, I could maybe, y'know . . ."

Sheldon frowned. "You've got it wrong, LeBreck. First we build up a big catalog of unreleased crap. *Then* we let him overdose." There was silence for a few moments.

"I say we replace him," Rickie said loudly, still looking at his hands.

"What?"

"It's easy." Rickie smiled sadistically. "We want to have the next Jimi Hendrix, right? So let's rob Hendrix's grave, seal a tissue sample, and clone him. Then we won't need Buzz."

"Hmm." Sheldon's eyebrows went up, and then he shook his head. "No, it'd take too long, and the clone might sign with a different management company. We're stuck with Buzz."

Rickie sat up straight and looked at Sheldon. "You want a serious idea? Okay, how about maybe we're doing the wrong thing, trying to duplicate Hendrix's equipment. Since Buzz Taylor is *not* Jimi Hendrix, maybe we should try to come up with equipment that compensates for that."

"You got something in mind?"

"Maybe." Rickie scratched his neck and did the little aw-shucks act he used when he wasn't quite ready to talk about an idea. "But I need to talk to some people, first. This is going to take some time. And if it works, it's going to be expensive."

Sheldon shrugged. "You know Buzz. If you can find a gadget that slows down the way he pisses away money, buy it."

"I second that," Beverly said. Rickie slid out of his chair, found a phone, and got to work.

* * *

Six months later, as the entourage was getting ready to leave Los Angeles for Buzz Taylor's Summer in Europe Tour, Rickie showed the results to Sheldon and Beverly.

"Very nice," Sheldon said. "A black Stratocaster. You spent eighty thousand dollars on a plain black Stratocaster."

"Ah, it may *look* like a guitar," Rickie said, flashing the grin that meant he fully expected to blow their socks off, "but it's really a high-speed real-time Chowning-synthesis audio editor!"

"Come again?" Beverly said.

"I have an old buddy from back in college, we took some music physics courses together. We used to argue all the time; he thought digital control was the wave of the future and I knew that analog circuitry sounded better." Rickie shrugged. "Now he's a VP at Scentient Systems, drives a Ferrari Testosterona, and works on speech synthesis and artificial intelligence. Realtime waveshaping, grammatical structures, linear predictive coding—"

"Sounds fascinating," Sheldon interrupted. "Where's my eighty grand?"

"It's here," Rickie said, picking up the Stratocaster and caressing its neck. "This baby has been completely hol-

lowed out and stuffed with microelectronics, from the peghead to the strap button. There are 256 piezo pressure sensors in the fretboard alone; the bridge is actually a multiplex side-scanning sonar. This instrument can analyze and extrapolate on hand motions, playing patterns, rhythm structures and melodic trends—”

“You mean, it’s a computer?” Beverly asked.

Rickie chuckled. “A computer? Bev, that’s almost insulting! The guy who founded Sentient is an old Deadhead. He’s been designing all those expert stockbrokers just to subsidize his real life’s work—an A.I. model of Jerry Garcia. This instrument is the one and only very first artificially intelligent guitar synthesizer!”

“Let me get this straight,” Sheldon said, as he chewed on a thumbnail. “This computer—whatever—thinks it’s Hendrix?”

“‘Thinks’ is too strong a word, Sheli. The boys at Sentient cooked down everything from *Are You Experienced?* to *Electric Ladyland* and came up with a grammar of Hendrix style. The guitar just analyzes whatever’s coming in from its sensors and edits it to conform to the grammar. Takes about 20 nanoseconds: You get a little third-harmonic time smear, but nothing you’d notice in a hockey arena.”

“So no matter what you play, it comes out sounding like Hendrix?” Sheldon persisted. Rickie nodded. “What happens if you really fuck up?”

“Then it extrapolates from the melodic trend and synthesizes what you *should* have played.” Rickie grinned wickedly. “Sheldon, even *you* would sound like Hendrix if you played this guitar.”

“I would have to hear that to believe it.”

Rickie plugged the guitar into a practice amp, flipped a switch, and handed the guitar to Sheldon. With some difficulty, Sheldon plucked out “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” As Hendrix would have played it, had he used it in place of “The Star-Spangled Banner” in his Woodstock concert.

Sheldon believed.

“Excuse me,” Beverly interrupted, “but are you really planning to put that thing in Buzz’s hands? I mean, honestly, the guy needs coaching to screw in a light bulb.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Rickie giggled. “All he has to do is flick this little chromium switch here.” Rickie reached over, grabbed the pickup selector, and snapped it back and forth a few times. “Three settings: mellow, funky, and outrageous. Everything else is controlled by the computer. The volume and tone knobs are just for show. He doesn’t even need to *tune* it.”

Beverly shook her head. “I don’t know. How will we ever explain this to Buzz?”

“The same way we explain anything complicated to him,” Sheldon answered. “We lie.”

* * *

Rickie handed the guitar to Buzz during the sound check before the first London show. Beverly had made up a bizarre little story about finding it in a pawn shop on Charing Cross Road; Buzz looked dubious but agreed to try it out anyway. Thirty seconds into “Purple Haze,” he fell in love with the plain black Stratocaster.

As did some 5,000 fans that night.

The remaining tickets to the second London show sold out the next morning. A third show was added and it sold out in three hours. The London music critics, sniffing a trend in the wind, forgot their snide comments of the week before and began falling over themselves to praise Buzz Taylor. When the entourage left for Birmingham, Sheldon was already talking about moving the rest of the tour to larger venues; the Leeds show was moved to an outdoor stadium and even that proved too small. The fans who couldn’t get tickets started a proper riot and the concert ended in a volley of water cannon and tear gas, which added a fine air of 60’s nostalgia to the entire experience and gave the survivors many vivid memories.

In a little over a week Buzz Taylor went from being yet another overhyped up-and-coming act to being a bona fide world-class phenomenon. *Time* put him on the cover again. CD sales exploded. The entourage took three days off to get the smell of tear gas out of their sinuses, and Sheldon hopped a Concorde back to New York to negotiate an \$18-million recording contract and a \$30-million beer endorsement.

The following Friday, halfway through the Glasgow concert, the black Stratocaster let out a painful shriek and died.

* * *

“Yes, I *know* what time it is there!” Rickie screamed into the telephone as he paced about the Parisian hotel room. “It’s twelve hours after that overgrown calculator of yours damn near got me *killed* in Glasgow! Have you ever seen a Scottish soccer match? Do you know what 25,000 Scottish fans *do* when the star walks off halfway through the concert?” Rickie reached the end of the phone cord, spun savagely, and resumed pacing.

Sheldon, sitting on the bed and jet-lagged beyond hellief, tensely lit another black Sobranie cigarette.

“The batteries were flat,” Rickie said, forcing calm into his voice. “Dead as a Bosnian Pacifist.” Anger flashed across his face. “Of course I checked them before the show! I’m not exactly an *idiot*, you—” He bit off the rest of the sentence. “The lithium memory-protects were just fine. They still are. But the main ni-cads were low, so I replaced them before the show. Yes, a freshly charged set. I charged them myself.”

Sheldon took another deep drag on his cigarette, then tipped the ashes into his china coffee cup. The voice on the phone squabbled something.

“Until recently, about a week,” Rickie answered. “It dropped to about two days after the first London gig. Last night, we got less than two hours out of a full charge.”

Sheldon stubbed out the cigarette. Then, after a moment’s consideration, he lit another.

“No, I put it on the bench this morning. The same batteries, the same—yes, it checks out, but—” The squabbling rose in intensity. “Yeah? Well, thanks a lot, *buddy*. Thanks one whole fucking—hello?” Rickie clicked the cradle switch a few times, then put the handset back into the cradle and dropped the phone on the bed. “Overpaid son of a bitch,” he muttered.

Sheldon took another deep drag on his Sobranie, exhaled slowly, and asked, “Well?”

Rickie stalked over to the window, pushed aside the curtains, and winced at the sunlight. "He says we should have expected this. The guitar is still learning," Rickie let the curtains fall shut. Sheldon looked at him, blankly. "Neural network emulation," Rickie said. "The guitar is constantly rewriting its own program. Everything it picks up, everything Buzz teaches it, it analyzes and incorporates into its internal programming."

Sheldon let the smoke curl slowly from his mouth.

"So?"

"So the complexity of the program always increases. Meaning more parallel processes, meaning more processing steps, meaning it draws more amps. Meaning there's no way to cut the power consumption short of erasing its memory and starting over."

Sheldon started to take a sip of his coffee, then remembered that he'd been dumping his ashes in the cup. "Okay. We started from scratch once. We can do it again."

Rickie sat down on the low dresser. "Shel, haven't you been *listening* to our shows? I make a tape off the mixing board every night; you can borrow the cassettes if you like. Compare last night's 'All Along the Watchtowers' to the way it sounded a week ago.

"The pickups are sensitive to more than just string vibration. They pick up crowd noise, inductance from the stage amplifiers, EM-frequency noise from the lighting system—and then there's all those sensors tracking Buzz's body motion. The guitar has already learned that performance playing is different from practice playing. It put out sounds last night that weren't even in its vocabulary a week ago.

"The guitar is starting to mimic Buzz's stage style, Shel. It's not imitating Hendrix any more; it's imitating *Buzz Taylor* imitating Hendrix. It's turned into a hot dog. If we wipe its memory now, Buzz will wonder why he doesn't sound as flashy as he used to, and he'll teach it to be insecure and timid in the next go-round."

Sheldon got up, walked into the bathroom, and dumped out the dregs in his coffee cup. "That leaves us with our original problem. How do we keep the batteries from crapping out halfway through a show? Can't you just plug it into the wall or something?"

Rickie shrugged. "Not really. The cord from the guitar to the amp is a high-impedance audio line. If we run an AC power line parallel to it, we'll end up with the mother of all inductance hums. No, the right way to solve this—"

Sheldon could almost hear the gears of Rickie's brain groan into motion.

"—the *right* way to solve this would be to convert the whole thing to a 70-volt DC low-impedance system, and power it off the phantom supply for the stage mikes. Of course, that would take—"

Sheldon interrupted. "Can you have it done by tomorrow night?"

Rickie shook himself, as if surprised to find Sheldon there. "Shel, we're talking major re-engineering here. I was thinking I might be able to have it done by *August*."

Sheldon sat down on the bed and took a deep, thoughtful drag on his cigarette. "So we're back to batteries."

Rickie nodded. "Yeah. I can always splice in more, that's no problem. Trouble is, there's no room left inside the guitar. I'll have to mount them outside. And that means . . ."

Sheldon's eyebrows went up. "Buzz will begin to suspect that this is no ordinary guitar."

Rickie walked to the hallway door and opened it. "Let's find Beverly. We need to get our story straight."

* * *

That afternoon, they reintroduced Buzz to the Stratocaster. He immediately noticed the extra batteries tucked in elastic loops on the strap, and later, after repeated questioning, Beverly broke down and confessed that they'd spent a small fortune tracking down the man who'd customized Hendrix's guitars. She told him a wonderful, heart-rending tale of how they'd finally found him, penniless and dying, in a small town in Oregon; how he'd sworn Beverly and Rickie to secrecy and then, with his last dying breath, told Rickie how to build the secret booster circuit he'd built into all of Hendrix's guitars; how the black Stratocaster contained a duplicate of that circuit and Rickie had made her promise to tell no one, not even Buzz, about it; and ending with, "Please don't ever tell Rickie that I told you. He'd kill me." Beverly had spent years learning how to cry the exact amount necessary to be convincing.

Buzz had always loved apocryphal and semi-mystical tales about his rock heroes. He swallowed Beverly's tale hook, line, and sinker. It never occurred to him to ask why the secret booster circuit needed extra batteries after Glasgow.

* * *

Sheldon was having lunch at a sidewalk café in Milan, slowly enjoying the cannelloni, the sun, and a more than sufficient amount of vino rosso, when Rickie rushed up carrying a boombox the size of a Fiat's trunk. "Shel, I am worried," he said as he plunked the boombox down on the table and dragged a chair over. "I am *really* worried."

Sheldon took a sip of wine, dabbed his mouth with the corner of his napkin, and smiled. "What's to worry? Fourteen sold-out concerts since Glasgow and the guitar hasn't screwed up once. True, the strap is starting to look like a bandolier with all those extra ni-cad batteries—"

"Lithium," Rickie interrupted.

"Eh?"

"I had to switch to lithium batteries. Super-expensive and very touchy about the charge/discharge cycle."

Sheldon shrugged. "Still, what's to worry? The reviews just keep getting better. At last count we've got eighty cities begging to be on the next North American tour, and you should *die* to see the offer we just got from Tokyo!" Sheldon took another bite of cannelloni. "So I repeat: What's to worry?"

Rickie pulled a cassette out of the pocket of his new silk sportcoat, popped it into the boombox's waiting maw, and punched the play button. "Listen to the tape I made last night." The opening riff of 'Purple Haze' blasted out of the speakers, scaring every pigeon within a hundred yards into flight.

Sheldon listened attentively for thirty seconds or so,

then smiled. "Beautiful. Simply beautiful. The vocals are a bit murky and the guitar dominates the mix, but that's the way it should be. Buzz's guitar is the star of the show."

"That's not a mix," Rickie said. "That's a single channel feed. Direct line out of the guitar."

Sheldon stopped chewing. With some difficulty, he swallowed. "The guitar synthesizes *vocals* now?"

"Keep listening." The song flowed into a brilliant, soaring guitar solo, one more verse, and then slammed into a pyrotechnic effects-laden ending. The crowd went wild. *The crowd?*

"I'm worried," Sheldon whispered. "I'm *really* worried." He fumbled in his pockets for his cigarettes, found the box, and lit up his last Sobranie.

* * *

The original itinerary ended in Naples, but the offer to do one more show in London was just too attractive to turn down. Headline billing at an all-day charity concert; live coverage on television and radio with a delayed satellite broadcast to the States; an expected attendance of at least one hundred thousand; Sheldon accepted with only a little haggling for form's sake. Then he and Rickie took a week in St. Tropez to relax while Buzz and Beverly flew on ahead for a quickie press tour. By the time Rickie and Sheldon reached London, Beverly had amassed an impressive collection of clippings and tapes. To everyone's surprise, Buzz had come out of the interviews sounding quite intelligent and articulate, for a rock 'n' roll guitarist. He'd also taken to carrying the black Stratocaster with him to interviews, and acting very sly and mysterious about it. On more than one occasion he'd declared that the instrument had a soul of its own, and all his carryings-on with the guitar finally convinced *Guitarman* magazine to send a reporter and a photographer. At last word the interview was slated to appear as a three-part series starting in September, and the black Stratocaster would be the December centerfold.

"Rickie," Sheldon asked casually, "is there a non-disclosure clause in our contract with Sentient Systems?"

Rickie smiled. "Of course."

"And the new software the guitar is writing: Do we own it?"

"Of course."

"The National Association of Music Merchants estimates that two million teenage boys take up rock 'n' roll every year. Seventy-five percent of them get their first guitar for Christmas. How much do you think they'd pay for a guitar that's guaranteed to make them sound *exactly* like Buzz Taylor?"

Rickie didn't answer. He was thinking about how much he was going to enjoy driving his new Ferrari, once he got it back to the States.

* * *

The crowd was already at fever pitch when Buzz hit the stage, and he fed off their energy. Three months on the road had refined his showman's skills; he blazed, he sparkled, he *flirted* with a hundred thousand people at once. The crowd went from wild, to hysterical, to orgasmic, and still they wanted more, *more, MORE!* He brought them, teetering, to the brink, and then left the

stage. As one, a hundred thousand people began stomping and screaming for an encore.

He satisfied them! One reporter later said that when the opening riff of the encore, "Purple Haze," ripped out the P.A. system, people twenty miles away in Brighton heard the crowd roar. Buzz tore into the song with a maniac intensity that stunned everyone who saw or heard; his solo gave guitarists the world over something to study and imitate for years to come. When he reached the final, feedback-laden chord of the song the black Stratocaster howled, bellowed, swelled and rang and *screamed* like a supersonic fighter in a Mach 3 death-dive—

—and exploded in a blinding, actinic flash. The crowd thought it was part of the act. They were still stamping and shouting for another encore two hours after Buzz was packed into an air ambulance and flown to the Royal Free Hospital burn unit.

* * *

Sheldon called the council of war in Buzz's private ward, after the last nurse had left. "Damage report?"

Denny LeBreck looked uneasily at Rickie and Bev, then spoke up. "Uh, Shel, you were here with us the whole time. The consulting surgeons said—"

Sheldon waved a hand to cut him off. "Yeah, yeah, I know; cuts, burns, shock, and he'll be just fine after some skin grafts and trauma counseling. All this expensive crap"—Sheldon slapped a bedside rack full of monitors—"is just in case he by some freak chance goes into cardiac arrest, and the restraints are to keep him from pulling out the catheter when the sedation wears off. We all know Buzz is going to make it. The question is: What about his career? Beverly?"

The PR manager was buffing her long red fingernails on the lapel of her original Coco Chanel blazer. She stopped, looked up, and flashed Sheldon a dazzling smile. "Personally, the minute I get out of here, I'm calling my broker and buying stock in FTD. We are getting flowers and telegrams from every living creature in the entire goddam *universe*." She considered her fingernails again, then casually added, "That last courier was hand-carrying a telex from *Entertainment Tonight*. They're promising a five-minute daily update as long as he's hospitalized, a half-hour retrospective if he's permanently disfigured. And *Rolling Stone* has guaranteed us front cover with a black border if he—he—" Her smile faded, and she made a small gesture at the bandaged form in the bed. "Y'know."

Sheldon frowned, and nodded. "Yeah. I know." He turned to the audio engineer. "Rickie?"

Rickie was sitting on a chair in the corner, polishing a speck of imaginary tarnish on the sterling silver toe-cap of his left cowboy boot. "We got it all down on film and tape." He studied the toe a moment, then resumed polishing. "Six cameras on the stage; two on crowd reaction. 32-channel digital audio master, direct tap off the main stage mixer, with full SMPTE encoding." He paused again, then looked at Beverly. "Gold doesn't tarnish. Do you think I should have told them to use gold instead?"

"Silver complements the hand-tooled ostrich hide better," Beverly said. "A Winter like you should always stick to silver."

"Really?"

Sheldon cleared his throat loudly. "If you two don't mind." Bev and Rickie looked at him innocently. "What about the guitar? What the hell happened?"

Rickie shrugged. "Beats me. The boys at Sentient think it might have picked up its own amplified output, tried to edit it, and gone into an exponential feedback loop. Kept drawing more and more power until something melted. Something shorted. Then"—he made a little two-handed explosion gesture—"ka-boom. I told you those lithium batteries were touchy."

Sheldon scowled. "That you did. Now tell me there's some good news."

Rickie smiled, and did his little aw-shucks routine one more time. "Well, as a matter of fact, the neural net is a total loss. But we did manage to salvage most of the EPROMs. And a certain bright boy had the presence of mind to make a full core backup yesterday morning."

"Which means?"

"In the immortal words of the Six Million Dollar Man, we can rebuild it. We have the technology."

Sheldon nodded with satisfaction. "And we can disable the damn learning circuit this time?"

"No problem-o." Rickie grinned. "Actually, it's much easier to build a learning-impaired A.I. than a fully functional one. Black Beauty II will be ready to rock in about—"

There was a muffled moan from the bed.

"Buzz?" Beverly wondered aloud.

"He's trying to talk!" LeBreck gasped.

Sheldon elbowed past LeBreck. "What's he saying?"

Beverly elbowed past Sheldon. "Sounds like . . . sounds like, 'No.'"

Beverly and Sheldon looked at each other. "No?"

"Warnin'," Buzz rasped, clear enough for them all to hear. "Warnin'—from beyond th'—th'—"

Beverly made an intuitive leap. "Grave?"

"Yeah." Buzz's voice tapered off. "Th' grave."

Beverly and Sheldon looked at each other again, then started to turn to Rickie.

"Django!" Buzz cried out, his voice suddenly clear. "Charlie! Wes, baby, s'good to see you!" He jerked; twitched; fought briefly against the restraints. When his voice came back, it was a tearful whisper. "Yeah. I unnerstan'. Give up rock. Gonna give up rock. Jazz." His tone turned soft; the parts of his face that weren't bandaged were covered in a beatific smile. "Yeah. Devote th' rest of m' life . . . t' be-bop jazz." With a gentle sigh, he relaxed, and slipped back into sedated sleep.

Beverly looked at Sheldon.
Sheldon looked at Rickie.

Rickie bent down and looked at the cardiac monitor.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "it's a scandal, the way they build these things. I mean"—he jiggled a thin black wire—"if someone were to pull this bit here out, why, whole minutes could pass before the ward sister notices that his heart has stopped." With studied carelessness, Rickie stood up, turned around, and hooked a loop of wire around the toe of his right boot.

Beverly caught the cue. "Let's see: 'The entertainment world was saddened today . . .'"

"Shocked," Sheldon suggested, as he picked up a pillow and tested its heft.

"Shocked," agreed Beverly, "by the tragic death of rock legend Buzz Taylor—"

"Who at first seemed to be only superficially injured," LeBreck added. Beverly and Sheldon turned to him with surprised looks, as he stepped forward and offered them a small handful of brightly colored pills and capsules.

"However, the combination of prescription sedatives and illegal narcotics proved fatal to the 'Backstage Bastard,' as those closest to him—"

Beverly was momentarily stunned. "Buzz used drugs?"

LeBreck shook his head. "No, dammit, I had to buy my own. I just thought, if it'd help, I could, y'know . . ."

Sheldon frowned. "You've got it wrong, LeBreck. First we let the fans iconify him. *Then* we keep the story alive with periodic infusions of dirt."

Beverly nodded in agreement. "Can you hang tight for about a year?"

LeBreck smiled, and put the pharmacopoeia back into his pocket. "Cool. A year. That'll give me time enough for that book I always wanted to write."

"*Buzz Taylor: The Untold Story?*" Bev suggested. "The steamy exposé that rips the lid off his sordid private world? The wild parties? The loose women? The underage sheepdogs?"

LeBreck nodded. "Yeah. Only I can't actually, like, y'know, type." He looked at his hands helplessly.

"Don't worry," Beverly reassured him. "As told to works even better." She turned to Sheldon. "Well?"

Sheldon hefted the pillow one last time, then nodded to Rickie. "It's showtime."

Rickie took a step forward. The wire came free with a gentle *snick*. ♦

In the Valley of Life

Pete D. Manison

You start with a mood, a feeling, a tone—something from deep within you; perhaps something from beyond your own tiny self. Then you draw it through you, through your mind and your body and especially through your soul. You don't feel the contact pads or the superconducting processors or any of the other technology your art employs. It's all just you, an extension of your essence. So when you bend space around itself, when you draw a loop in time or fragment a singularity, it's not a dry, mechanical act.

It's a work of art.

So you want to be a reality sculptor. Join the crowd. I've seen a million million of you and stopped counting. And still you keep coming. Good. Good. One day one of you will make it. One day one of you will feel the vibration that's the voice of the Great Awareness speaking to itself, using me as its mouth and you as its ears. And then we'll



Illustration by Pete D. Manison

have contact. We'll have put our puny vessels to the use for which they were intended.

And beauty will arise. Again. Welcome. My name is Aurelio Long, sculptor of time and space, and, you see, I'm searching for a successor.

You, Yes, you in the back. You have a question, I can tell. Oh, is that it? Yes, it's been asked before. How did I get my start? I can tell you that if you like. No, it doesn't matter that I've told it a million million times before. There are no new stories, just as there are no new sculptures. That's why it is that when you hear a good story or see a good sculpture, you *know* it is good. It's not discovery. It's recognition.

Picture dark green, moving, coaxing black shadows from the earth beneath slanting sheets of rain silvered by the moonlight. That was the setting in which I first encountered Bevlyn O'Connor, master sculptress of the High Art and single resident of the Valley of Life. I had done what each of you has done: cast off the VR webs of the Dream Hives and gone out into the real world, as few have the courage to do. Like you, I had no inkling what I expected to find out there. I only knew I wanted life—real life, not the reconstituted simulations of past lives on a lost Earth.

So, the Valley of Life. The impossible green and rain and air, just as the stories claimed. Here, on Mars, where such things were unknown. Where such things could not be.

* * *

"You may remove that helmet, young man. And that pressure suit, too. You won't need them here. That much, at least, I can promise."

I turned. The woman was ancient, her hair gray and long and streaked with black, her skin wrinkled and pale. I felt my first pangs of doubt, seeing what time could do to real human flesh.

"Come on," she insisted. "Have you come this far just to stand there gawking? Take it off, I say. And tell me your name."

Something compelled me to obey. Maybe it was the aura of command she radiated. Maybe it was the undeniable reality of her flaws and imperfections.

"I'm called Daystar," I told her as I undid the latches on my helmet.

She smiled, but with only one side of her mouth, which seemed to mean something. "Not your Hive name. Not your Dream name. Tell me the name by which you were born, the name your parents gave you."

I had both hands on my helmet now. I hesitated again. What if it was a trick? What if there was no valley, no rain, no woman and no air? I'd lived simulations this real. And yet, I had never doubted them.

Which also might mean something.

"Aurelio Long," I said, and I took off my helmet. The air was sweet and wet. The rain, which had been pounding my helmet, now arced around me as if repelled by an invisible sphere.

"Aurelio," she said. "That's Spanish, isn't it?"

I nodded, unzipping my pressure suit. "My mother came from Mexico. My father was American."

She smiled, this time with her whole mouth. "My name

is Bevlyn O'Connor," she said. "I've been waiting a long time for you to come."

She showed me her valley. It was two miles long and not very deep, located near the equator where there's rarely even morning mist, except in some of the deeper canyons like the Great Rift. Here, ferns grew along the banks of mirror-blue streams, and birds called out their warning shrieks as they dove to feast on buzzing insects.

"It's beautiful," I sighed. Her eyes sparkled, and I saw tears there.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I've wanted to share it with someone for so long."

Overhead, something moved. I looked up. Phobos hung there, a bright knot of light moving, if you watched carefully, fast enough for the eye to track its changing position against the background stars. It reminded me, with a jolt, of where I was.

"This . . ." I started. "I don't understand."

She gestured, her hand opening with serpentine grace, and I saw a rock path that climbed up the near valley wall. Taking the path, we soon stood on the lip of the ridge. Beyond, red Martian desert stretched, bleak and barren and rock-strewn, to the horizon. The valley just ended, right there, and the world began.

"It can't be," I whispered. I took a step forward, then stopped myself, thinking of the near-vacuum that reason said must exist there.

"Go on," she said gently.

I took a step out of the valley. And ended up back inside it. The step somehow turned me. Now I was facing the green, lush interior. My senses rebelled. Surely my body was to blame. An error. Yes, a mistake.

I tried again.

Again, a step outward brought me back inside. And I understood.

"You're a sculptress," I said.

She inclined her head to one side, let her eyes alone move to regard me.

"But I thought that was just a story," I said. "I didn't think it was real."

Her mouth tightened. "You, a child of the Dream Hives, whose life has been nothing but illusion, speak now as a judge of reality?" She seemed more amused than puzzled. And a little scornful, too.

I looked her over. She was clad in smooth, silky robes whose colors whispered in the wind. "Where are the contact pads, the processors, all the rest of the tech stuff?" I asked, still skeptical.

She looked impatient now. "I'm not sculpting now. It's not VR, you know. Once a reality sculpture is created, it's free-standing, permanent. If it's any good at all, that is. This valley is spatially enfolded, held within a reshaped pocket of the universe. It's timeless."

I saw the truth in what she said. And wasn't this what I'd been seeking when I'd left the Dream Hives? Here was something real, something you could touch. Yet only questions bubbled to the surface of my mind.

"Aurelio," she said, taking my arm. "You've come only just in time. You see, I am searching for a successor. I have in mind a Masterwork."

Such dark purpose lurked in those words. I felt fear. Real fear. Not the fear of a virtual threat, a fear the body might believe in but the mind would always know to be false. Thank the Great Awareness for that feeling. For the first time in my life, I was *alive*.

"It is no accident that brought you here," Bevlyn O'Connor said. "Let me teach you to sculpt."

* * *

I resisted for that first week or so, as she showed me, piece by piece, the work she had created. Already I had started down the path, but if you'd told me so then, I would have denied it.

"This valley is my gallery," she would say as we walked along or rested in the shade of a poplar or sat, just sat, beside a clear, still pond.

In one, a caterpillar climbed along a leaf that hung in space, swaying now and then as if attached to an unseen branch blowing in the wind, though the air at that moment was still. Presently, a cocoon was spun. And then glorious rebirth.

The cycle repeated.

And repeated.

"Darling creature," Bevlyn sighed. "Sometimes I envy him. Immortal, eternal. His life wrapped in a coil of time. Never to pass away."

We moved along.

In a stream that started nowhere and ended nowhere else, salmon migrated endlessly, trapped blissfully in time, innocent of the knowledge that on Earth their kind was long extinct.

And in one corner of the valley, the sea, and the beach, and the jellyfish and the kelp. All wrapped in the preservative of closed time, closed space. Immune even to the cancer of man.

"This is wonderful," I said, one day, after watching the killer whales hunt seals and the grizzly bears hibernate through a long Alaskan winter. "You've rescued Old Earth. It's all here."

Her smile was wan. "Not all," she said. "But space holds the rest, and time. All in the reach of a sculptor."

"This should be shared."

She nodded. "In time, when the hollow dreams are seen in their lack of substance, empty and meaningless. When people stop running and start to live again. Maybe in your lifetime."

We turned to face each other, and she took both my hands in her soft, smooth, weather-worn palms. The question was in her eyes.

The answer, I knew, was in my own.

* * *

I learned slowly.

Sculpting, you see, is not only a craft, not even just an art. It's more like a religion, but one with no words, no limiting labels or constricting forms. I learned that much in the first few days.

"No, no, no." Bevlyn tore the contact pads from my temples and forced open my eyelids. Before me hung a shape, a precise triangular slice of reality, tall weeds growing along some low hill. It looked all right to me. I told her as much.

"Aurelio, listen to me. All of time and space is out there. Too much to bring it all here. Even when we limit the focus to Old Earth, it is still too much. You have learned to shape space-time, a grand skill in itself. But open up. Let an awareness greater than your own guide you to those things that can make history art."

I wasn't sure what she meant. I tried again.

And failed.

And failed again.

"Dry," she croaked. "Lifeless. You waste space in my gallery. Perhaps you are not, after all, the one."

I felt rage at her words, so hard had I tried. And sadness, too.

"Let me show you," Bevlyn said. "Let me sculpt you a dream."

I handed her the contact pads.

As Bevlyn slid the hair back from her temples and attached the pads, I watched a metamorphosis take place. The lines in her face seemed to soften, fade. Her shape grew fuller, rounder, no longer bony but vital, strong. Her hair, I swear by the Awareness, even lost its streaks of gray. She was an old woman no more. In the practice of her art, she revealed the young woman within, the aspect of herself that was true and pure.

She closed her eyes.

"Don't direct it," she said. "Let it seek its own course." Her eyes moved beneath her lids like those of a Dreamer in VR. Yet so unlike them.

"There. Yes. Oh, yes. Let the Awareness work through you. Let it inhabit your fingers and your mind. Release yourself to it. Become its sharp, bright tool."

A point of light was born in the air before her. My gaze shifted from Bevlyn to the light. It was growing. Perhaps growing is not the right word. New space was being added to that which already existed. Not consuming the other space, simply moving it aside, making room for itself.

Words are crude tools here.

"Now," she whispered, "you know you have your subject when you feel the pulse of its life inside you. That's when the seeking ends and the shaping begins. Don't use your mind. Use your soul."

The point of light had become a sphere, and within that sphere a blizzard was raging. Snow. Real honest-to-God snow. Swirling in a wind I could never feel, forming patterns, brief patterns that seemed to hint at meanings, at order in disorder, that made me turn inward to find similar patterns within myself.

"But don't stop there. You shape space as well as time. Explore every aspect."

Now a single snowflake grew to fill the sphere, starting as a tiny crystal, sprouting spokes, crossmembers, more crossmembers. A fractal universe. Its growth spoke to me of life, of change, of the drive from the simple to the complex.

And back to the simple.

Bevlyn opened her eyes. She smiled faintly as she removed the contact pads and regarded her new creation, but I couldn't miss a hint of sadness in her eyes, a touch of loss.

"You give of yourself when you sculpt," she explained.

"You put a little of your soul into each work. Sometimes more than a little." She handed me the pads again. "Try again, Aurelio. I must rest now."

She left me.

That night, I created my first work of art.

* * *

"You have made progress," Bevlyn told me sometime later, maybe a month or so. I'd filled a small corner of her valley with my creations, clumsy ones at first, then less clumsy. A Viking ship, the deck pitching in a storm, the sky above alive with lightning. An eagle in flight, forever in flight, rescued from a time before troubles. Some were even beautiful.

"You are learning to recognize truth," Bevlyn told me. "Now, perhaps, you are ready."

The next morning I found her, the contact pads still affixed to her temples, and I learned what she had done.

* * *

Flickering shadows thrown out by the orange light of the fire I had built to keep her warm. The harsh bite of wood smoke in the air.

And Bevlyn.

The coma had lasted five days, and she had almost died. How I managed to keep her alive, I still don't know. On the sixth day, when she awakened, I could tell at once it had been no accident, as I had hoped. This . . . *tbing* . . . was something she had planned for a long time.

"So," she rasped, her voice like a rusty, creaking hinge, "I failed." She didn't even turn to look at the new sculpture that filled so much of the valley. I could scarcely take my eyes from it.

Bevlyn O'Connor, master sculptress of the High Art. Crying a baby, her face blood-red, her tongue questing for her mother's nipple. Running as a little girl, giggling, blue skirts swishing, knees skinned and scabbed. Dancing with a lover. Loving. Grieving. Weeping with joy at the sight of her first good work.

Then aging. Then aging more.

"Why?" I asked her, later, when she'd slept and awakened again.

"Aurelio, my sweet young Aurelio. So innocent. So full of soul. You can't comprehend endings, can you? Of course not. You've only just begun."

I waited.

"There comes a time in the life of a sculptor," she said, "when you find yourself repeating. The sculptures are new, yes, new and different. Yet somehow the same. It's depth, Aurelio. You've gone as deep as you can. You've done your best work and you know it. Except . . ."

She closed her eyes, summoning strength, then continued without opening them. "There's always one work left to do. One great Masterwork that must, by definition, be the last."

I glanced at Bevlyn again. Not the person, the sculpture. Something inside me was tingling. "Self-portrait," I whispered.

When I looked back, she'd opened her eyes again and was staring at me. They were so bright, those two ancient orbs. "A sculptor's prerogative, Aurelio. Immortality. That one last great wrenching effort that takes so much of your soul there's nothing left to regenerate. That one creation that transcends them all, that only *you* can treat with such intimacy, such feeling, because it's *you*. It's all of you. Your last gift to the world."

I nodded. "It's beautiful," I said. "It's wonderful."

Her lips curled down at the corners. "Look more closely," she said. "Something's missing."

I couldn't see it.

"The end," she explained. "The one piece that gives the others meaning, without which my life lacks perspective. Without which I am incomplete, nothing. My death."

She reached out to me, her hand unsteady, and there was a pleading look in her eyes. I wanted to turn away. I couldn't. Her need was simply too great. My love of her had grown too strong to ignore that need.

"You must help me try again," Bevlyn said. "When my strength returns, you must help me finish it."

* * *

You can see the rest for yourselves, you who come to the Valley of Life. It's there, in the distance, beside the unfinished one. Bevlyn runs there, young forever, her work transforming her wrinkled skin to smooth, her gray hair to black, her tiredness to vigor. But watch a little longer and you'll see maturity emerge, then wisdom. A little longer still, and these things will yield the greatest prize of all: completion. Rebirth. The closing of a circle, an endless loop in reality.

Bevlyn lives.

And she dies.

And she lives, yes, again.

So you want to be a reality sculptor. Join the crowd. I've seen a million million of you and stopped counting. But I've never given up hoping. See that young man in Bevlyn's last sculpture? That's me. I know it's hard to find the resemblance, because my black hair's gone white now and because I walk with a stoop and my eyes are clouded with cataracts. But that's Aurelio Long there, in that sculpture.

And soon in another.

So keep coming, please. Keep waking from your false lives in the Dream Hives and hearing the silent call that is the voice of the Great Awareness speaking to itself, using me as its mouth and you as its ears. Keep coming here to my gallery and soaking up the fragments of an Earth that was lost . . . and found again.

Keep learning. Keep seeking. And let me teach you my art. One day, one day soon, one of you will be good enough. Then we'll have contact. Then a new sculptor will emerge as an old one fades away.

You see, I'm seeking a successor. I have in mind a Masterwork. ♦

Unemployment, Then and Now

W. Gregory Stewart

I. THEN

Zap. Hiss.
Clunk.

The shot had gone wide. So wide that Jesse Nordstrom didn't even bother to move, let alone seek cover. He knew that a shot like that only came from one of two kinds of hunters: a cat-n-mouse, looking to play with him a while before getting serious about the hunt (in which case he was in no immediate danger); or a novice, not yet comfortable with the equipment. In which case he was in no immediate danger. The aim of a novice was erratic at best—Jesse stood more of a chance of running into a random shot accidentally while trying to

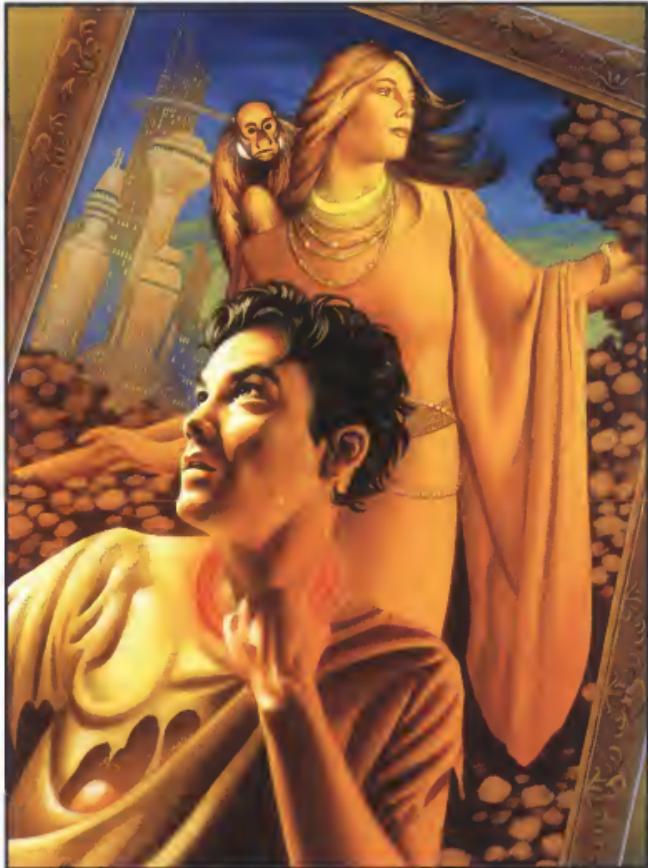


Illustration by David Martin

evade it than he did of being hit intentionally if he stayed where he was.

So. He stayed where he was. For now.

* * *

Jesse's employment collar had gone yellow five weeks ago, after he had delivered the Pannhauser portrait. An oil. Pannhauser herself had contracted the commission, but her husband had been less than satisfied, ready to criticize and unreluctant of plaint. Oil plaint, Jesse thought at the time: art humor.

"I don't think you've done her justice," Julius Pannhauser had whined. "I don't think you understand her at all."

Ah. So. This was never the real problem.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Pannhauser—but it's certainly understandable. I did *not* choose the subject matter, as you know. Your wife was very clear about what she wanted. And the client's desires . . ."

"Her desires are one thing. Your execution of the commission is quite something else. There is no dignity, no humanity, no *talent*, Mr. Nordstrom, no talent whatsoever or at all. No *integrity*. And furthermore . . ."

"And furthermore shut up, Julius." Ms. Pannhauser herself entered the room. Carrying something between ceremony and disinterest, she stood before the canvas. She considered, as a long minute passed. She continued to consider, and a longer minute followed. She turned.

And she smiled.

"Mr. Nordstrom. You are a genius. Well, at least, you are *very* capable. Julius. Right now, your job is this. Punch the contract. And pay Mr. Nordstrom." Ceremony. And disinterest. And something else again.

"Oh, I'll do that, all right—that's the one thing I'll *enjoy* doing," Julius said viciously. "The one and only thing—give me the damned contract, Nordstrom."

Jesse held out the contract. Julius Pannhauser nearly jerked (and certainly snatched) it out of the artist's hand, and pressed his thumb into one of several depressions along the length of the green cylinder. When he did this, an amazingly large number of credits (from Jesse's perspective) switched account allegiance from Pannhauser to Nordstrom. (From the Pannhauser perspective, it was chump change.) Then, glaring at Jesse Nordstrom with something like real hatred, and something like the hard, coldly considered edge of a schoolyard bully just fingered by a second-grade victim, Pannhauser moved his thumb to a different depression, and de-pressed. The contract cylinder changed color, from green to yellow.

Simultaneously, the employment collar on Jesse's neck changed. From green to yellow.

* * *

Twelve years ago the green lobbies and the gun lobbies had gotten together. Twelve years ago they had hammered out a plan that, ultimately, had made *both* of these groups happy, and won the approval of 47% of the rest of the tax-paying populace as well.

This is what the greens wanted: leave the animals alone, endangered or otherwise. No hunting. Spang none of it. And that's all.

This is what the guns wanted: guns. And hunting.

This is what the tax-paying populace wanted: they did not want to be a tax-paying populace.

And this is what they all got: The Unemployment Retirement Act. The unemployed had always been fair game, politically, for both sides of any issue. Now they were fair game again. Literally.

It worked this way. Everyone above driving age was issued a white employment collar. When you got a job, your employer reported that you had a job, records were made and buttons were pushed and signals went out and your collar turned green. When you lost your job, your employer reported that, too—and your collar turned yellow. After a month without a job, your collar went red—and you were fairgame. A hunter could bag you, oh-so-very literally—bring you down with beam or projectile, killing you quite in fact, no pain pellet fallacy here, no radio ping, no gotcha-gotcha-all-fall-down. You. Were. Dead.

And then your insides went out to the organ banks, and your head, on the wall of the hunter who had Retired you. Oh, and then there was the pet food thing.

So the guns were happy—hell, that's what they were always *really* shooting at, anyway. And the greens were happy because all the world's fuzzy bunnies and wild wolves and beasts wilde or of other ilk were all safe safe safe forever. And the 47% of the tax-paying populace who approved, approved because their tax liability was reduced every time a fairgame got Retired. And everyone else kept their mouths shut because the gathering of coincidental gut would likely someday be keeping them alive, or their children or their spouses or someone they knew—didn't matter what or who, they were bought off, too.

Anyway. And so.

There are always problems. In the beginning, a *lot* of retirees ended up Retired. Too much of a stink over that—grey collars were introduced, and taken off the fairgame list.

And there are always loopholes. Julius Pannhauser's collar, for example, was white—never having been employed, his collar had never turned green. Having never been green, it couldn't go yellow. And it most certainly would not have been sporting for it to go red without fair warning. His wife's collar, on the other hand, was green—she *was* Pannhauser Industries. But it needn't have been. She had inherited an empire from her mother, and could have gone white through life, although she chose not to. Julius had gone the other way. Julius always went the other way. Once it had been charming. . . .

In time, the hardcore unemployed were nearly all Retired, although some hung on—wily, elusive urban quarry, who seemed finally to have found something they were good at. Some achieved near legendary status, like 'Gator Nate of New York, who was said to live in the sewers and command armies of erstwhile pets.

Once the initial numbers of easy victims and chronic unemployed had been reduced, the availability of fairgame dropped dramatically, and the rules changed. Safe Zones were established, as much to prolong the sport as to provide some protection to those unfortunates who found

themselves unemployed through no fault of their own. Even then, no one was permitted to stay in a Safe Zone more than two days out of every ten—the collars monitored your presence in a Safe Zone, and delivered painful shocks once the allowable time was used up. The shocks continued with increasing intensity until the fairgame left the Zone. Or died.

Some people—commission artists like Jesse Nordstrom, contract help, office temps, seasonal workers, construction workers—were constantly moving back and forth between green and yellow, with the occasional side trip into red, as jobs and assignments came and went. Some had no choice—it was all they knew how to do. Others, like Jesse, preferred this way of life—it kept them sharp. It kept them competitive. It kept them alive in a way they couldn't explain (they would tell you), but you know what they meant (they would say). You didn't, of course. But how could you question it, after that?

* * *

Over four weeks later—nearly five—Jesse has cycled into and out of Safe Zones three times. Just now, he is out of.

Zap.

Hiss.

Close. Too close. This was cat-n-mouse. And this was closing in. Clunk.

Jesse had not been able to line up a commission during the yellow grace period. And he had not been able to work a deal during his time in the Safe Zones (employment counselors, communikits, job listings)—any resource necessary for finding and getting a job could be found and gotten at the administrative hub of a Safe Zone).

Such a thing had never happened before. Jesse had never spent more than the first day in Safe before receiving a commission. He was well known. He was an artist of standing and reputation. He hung in museums.

He couldn't catch a break.

And finally—after talking with Jon Reswald, industrialist art collector and long-time patron—he knew why.

* * *

"I'm sorry, Jess."

"But *why*? You have a commission, I need a commission—we've worked together before. Why?"

"Look, if I tell you, you don't know where you heard it from, OK?"

"Jon, I—"

"OK?" Reswald pushed the question again. Hard.

"OK, OK."

"Julius Pannhauser. I don't know what you did to him. Or how. And maybe it doesn't matter. Anyway, he's got a word out on you."

Jesse felt a Cold Hand Clutch His Heart—he hated clichés, and that just made it worse. "What word," he said flatly, not even asking, already knowing.

"Worth More Dead Than Alive. He says you're burnt out. He says your canvases can only appreciate now if you're dead. And a lot of investing collectors are listening to him."

"Jon, that's drool and you know it . . ." Jesse exploded. Or started to. Reswald cut him off in mid-plode.

"There's a little more. Pannhauser Industries is black-

listing you. And anyone who touches you. They threatened me. They can destroy me. They've already hit my pharmaceuticals, just to make the point. Jess, I can't commission you. At least, I can't commission you and still have a pot to piss in. Jess, I'm an old man with weak kidneys; I need a pot to piss in."

Reswald offered credits, but Nordstrom had credits. What he needed was a job—and now it looked as though no one would—*could*—give him one. His forebrain activities drifted in contingencies.

"Jess. Jesse."

"What?" Jesse took the few steps necessary to get back to here-and-now reluctantly.

"Just what the hell did you do to Julius Pannhauser, anyway? Why is he out to get you?"

"Nothing. I thought it was nothing. I *thought* it was funny. His wife . . . Look, she asked for a certain setting, a certain look. A kind of post-Industrial Heroic. With Zen overtones. She's in flowing robes, flowing hair, striding forth from a background of Pannhauser buildings and Pannhauser satellites, the whole Industries, looking regal, determined, very godlike . . . a real ego piece. And on her shoulder, there's a monkey. Just along for the ride. A monkey in a white collar. Uh . . . maybe it looks a little like Julius Pannhauser. OK, a *lot* like Julius Pannhauser. Uh, no big thing. Right? Jon?"

Sometimes silence is the loudest thing. Jesse heard nothing but sadness and pity on the other end of the phone. "Well. Thanks, Jon. Yeah. Bye."

II. AND NOW

It is days later. Again. Again, Jesse is skulking. Jesse is carefully working his way back to a Safe Zone. He is not in a good neighborhood. Buildings are old. Doorways smell. The graffiti is inane and—Jesse notices—not well executed. Alleys are rat- and rubbish-ridden. And just now, all of this suits his mood perfectly.

Zap. Hiss. Jesse turns one way.

Zap. Hiss. Jesse turns the other way.

Zap. Zap. Hiss. Jesse turns around.

"Nordstrom."

Clunk.

Zap.

"Pannhauser."

Hiss. Clunk.

Sometimes you are surprised by the things you are expecting. Jesse has been expecting Julius Pannhauser for some time now. Only one hunter was after him—that fact had become evident early on—and it took a lot of influence, a lot of credits, to buy off all the prey-hungry hunting public and keep a quarry private. Julius Pannhauser had influence and credits (his wife's, of course, but he was never one to cavil over any kind of artificial yours/mine, his/hers divisions). Influence. Credits. *And* a grievance.

So Jesse has been expecting Julius Pannhauser. But he hasn't been expecting him to be the red-eyed, wide-eyed nearly crazed creature that now confronts him. All that is lacking is maniacal laughter.

Pannhauser laughs maniacally.

(Oh, good, thinks Jesse; it would have been a shame to waste such an easy cliché opportunity.)

"Nordstrom."

Now Jesse remains silent.

"You're mine, Nordstrom. And look what I've got. Just. For. You. You've probably never seen one of these before."

This is true enough. Pannhauser is holding what looks like a beam weapon, but not like any Jesse has seen before. It bears the Pannhauser Industries logo.

"You're right. What is it?" Jesse is not sure that he really wants to know, but he always observes the necessary courtesies.

"'roid cutter, Nordstrom. And you're going to be the 'roid."

Ah. Jesse has never *seen* an asteroid cutter, but he knows about them, beam devices designed to do anything a miner might want to do to an asteroid. Shatter it, bruise it, push it out of one orbit and into another—or into the sun; 'roid cutters can do very heavy-duty work—very brutal work—very efficiently. But they can also do very delicate work—slice off ore samples mere molecules thick, carve out the heart of a 'roid to create a habitat for a homesick miner, precisely halve or quarter or even more precisely subdivide a lode 'roid among a team of miners and their backers—it is a versatile tool, one that Jesse Nordstrom has always been curious about, has always wanted to try for sculpting something enormous, but never could. Because by law, 'roid cutters are not allowed on-planet.

This one is on-planet, though. But then—it *does* bear the Pannhauser Industries logo.

Jesse is quiet.

"You made me look ridiculous, Nordstrom."

"I thought I didn't do your wife justice."

"Shut up, Nordstrom," Pannhauser clarifies. "Just shut up."

"You see how this works," he goes on, indicating the cutter. "I adjust the spread of the beam here, the force here—I select pulsing or steady *bere*. And range. Now watch." Pannhauser twiddles and switches, and aims the beam at an abandoned diner across the street. Pannhauser fires. The diner collapses. And a convention of rats decides to adjourn early, and heads off from the rubble in all directions.

Pannhauser twiddles and Pannhauser switches and Pannhauser aims and fires, slicing the feet off a passing rat quite precisely. The rat twitches where it has fallen. Pannhauser laughs.

"I've given this a lot of thought, Nordstrom. A *lot* of thought. Small slices, just at first, I wondered? A few? A few more? A lot? Or crush some parts, just to start off, just to whet our appetites . . . Maybe take off your feet, and your hands, and let you try to crawl away? Ah, but I see I've given away the surprise already."

Pannhauser looks at the crippled rat. Twiddle. Switch. Aim. And fire. The rat explodes.

Twiddle. Switch.

"So, Nordstrom. So."

Aim.

* * *

Julius Pannhauser's employment collar suddenly turns green. The glow surprises him. As it does Jesse Nordstrom. Also, they are both surprised by the sudden arrival of a limo-copter. They are only slightly less surprised when Helen Pannhauser herself de-copts, *deus ex machina*. Or *boss ex copex*.

"Julius. You're fired." Ceremony. Disinterest. And something else.

And Julius Pannhauser's collar turns yellow; he sputters. "You can't fire me. I don't work for you. I don't *work*—I'm white. I *should* be white. *Why aren't I white?*"

Helen Pannhauser gestures. A Pannhauser Industries employee appears from the copter and hands her something. He hands her something else. She puts the second thing inside the first thing. The first thing lights up—it is a vidscreen. The second thing must be a cassette. The screen shows Nordstrom and the Pannhausers. (The second thing was a cassette.)

Just now, the onscreen image of Helen Pannhauser is talking—time-stamped, dated, all quite legally correct and unimpeachable: "Julius. Right now, your job is this. Punch the contract. And pay Mr. Nordstrom." And the image of Julius Pannhauser responds, with similar legality: "Oh, I'll do that, all right—that's the one thing I'll *enjoy* doing. The one and only thing . . ."

"It was the only thing you had to do," Ms. Pannhauser-in-the-flesh said, cutting the vid. "You took the job, Julius. I registered your acceptance of employment ten minutes ago. And then I registered the fact that I considered you discharged the minute you punched the contract."

(As has been mentioned, there are always loopholes.)

Suddenly, Julius Pannhauser's collar turns blisteringly, bloodily, brightly red.

Helen Pannhauser smiles coldly. She turns to Jesse. "Mr. Nordstrom. I have a commission in mind for you. Something unusual. Can you begin . . ." She pauses. "Immediately?"

Jesse finds that he can. ♦

Cliffs that Laughed

R. A. Lafferty

"Between ten and ten-thirty on the morning of October 1, 1945, on an island that is sometimes called Pulau Petir and sometimes Willy Jones Island (neither of them its map name), three American soldiers disappeared and have not been seen since.

"I'm going back there, I tell you! It was worth it. The limbs that laughed! Let them kill me! I'll get there! Oh, here, here, here, I've got to get hold of myself.

"The three soldiers were Sergeant Charles Santee of Orange, Texas; Corporal Robert Casper of Gobey, Tennessee;



Illustration by Pat Morrissey

and PFC Timothy Lorrigan of Boston which is in one of the eastern states. I was one of those three soldiers.

"I'm going back there if it takes me another twenty years!"

No, no, no! That's the wrong story. It happened on Willy Jones Island also, but it's a different account entirely. That's the one the fellow told me in a bar a few years later, just the other night, after the usual "Didn't I used to know you in the Islands?"

* * *

"One often makes these little mistakes and false starts," Galli said. "It is a trick that is used in the trade. One exasperates people and pretends to be embarrassed. And then one hooks them."

Galli was an hereditary storyteller of the Indies. "There is only one story in the world," he said, "and it pulls two ways. There is the reason part that says 'Hell, it can't be' and there is the wonder part that says 'Hell, maybe it is.' He was the storyteller, and he offered to teach me the art.

For we ourselves had a hook into Galli. We had something he wanted.

"We used the same stories for a thousand years," he said. "Now, however, we have a new source, the American Comic Books. My grandfather began to use these in another place and time, and I use them now. I steal them from your orderly tents, and I have a box full of them. I have *Space Comics* and *Commander Midnight*; I have *Galactic Gob and Mighty Mouse* and the *Green Hornet* and the *Masked Fetter*. My grandfather also had copies of some of these, but drawn by older hands. But I do not have *Wonder Woman*, not a single copy. I would trade three-for-one for copies of her. I would pay a premium. I can link her in with an island legend to create a whole new cycle of stories, and I need new stuff all the time. Have you a *Wonder Woman*?"

When Galli said this, I knew that I had him. I didn't have a *Wonder Woman*, but I knew where I could steal one. I believe, though I am no longer sure, that it was *Wonder Woman Meets the Space Magicians*.

I stole it for him. And in gratitude Galli not only taught me the storyteller's art, but he also told me the following story:

* * *

"Imagine about flute notes ascending," said Galli. "I haven't my flute with me, but a story should begin so to set the mood. Imagine about ships coming out of the Arabian Ocean, and finally to Jilolo Island, and still more finally to the very island on which we now stand. Imagine about waves and trees that were the great-great-grandfathers of the waves and trees we now have."

It was about the year 1620, Galli is telling it, in the late afternoon of the high piracy. These Moluccas had already been the rich Spice Islands for three hundred years. Moreover, they were on the road of the Manila galleons coming from Mexico and the Isthmus. Arabian, Hindu, and Chinese piracy had decayed shamefully. The English were crude at the business. In trade the Dutch had become dominant in the Islands and the Portuguese had faded. There was no limit to the opportunities for a courageous and dedicated raider in the Indies.

They came. And not the least of these new raiding men was Willy Jones.

It was said that Willy Jones was a Welshman. You can believe that or not as you like. The same thing has been said about the Devil. Willy was twenty-five years old when he finally possessed his own ship with a mixed crew. The ship was built like a humpbacked bird, with a lateen sail and suddenly appearing rows of winglike oars. On its prow was a swooping bird that had been carved in Muskat. It was named the *Flying Serpent*, or the *Feathered Snake*, depending on what language you use.

* * *

"Pause a moment," said Galli. "Set the mood. Imagine about dead men variously. We come to the bloody stuff all at once."

One early morning, the *Feathered Snake* overtook a tall Dutchman. The ships were grappled together, and the men from the *Snake* boarded the Dutch ship. The men on the Dutchman were armed, but they had never seen such suddenness and savagery as shown by the dark men from the *Snake*. There was slippery blood on the decks, and the croaking of men being killed.

"I forgot to tell you that this was in the passage between the Molucca Sea and the Banda," Galli said.

The *Snake* took a rich small cargo from the Dutch ship, a few ablebodied Malay seamen, some gold specie, some papers of record, and a dark Dutch girl named Margaret. These latter things Willy Jones preempted for himself. Then the *Snake* devoured that tall Dutchman and left only a few of its burning bones floating in the ocean.

"I forgot to tell you that the tall Dutch ship was named the *Luchtkastell*," Galli said.

Willy Jones watched the *Luchtkastell* disappearing under the water. He examined the papers of record, and the dark Dutch girl Margaret. He made a sudden decision: He would cash his winnings and lay up for a season.

He had learned about an island in the papers of record. It was a rich island, belonging to the richest of the Dutch spice men who had gone to the bottom with the *Luchtkastell*. The fighting crew would help Willy Jones secure the island for himself; and in exchange, he would give them his ship and the whole raiding territory and the routes he had worked out.

Willy Jones captured the island and ruled it. From the ship he kept only the gold, the dark Dutch girl Margaret, and three golems which had once been ransom from a Jew in Oman.

"I forgot to tell you that Margaret was the daughter of the Dutch spice man who had owned the island and the tall ship and who was killed by Willy," Galli said, "and the island really belonged to Margaret now as the daughter of her father."

For one year Willy Jones ruled the small settlement, drove the three golems and the men who already lived there, had the spices gathered and baled and stored (they were worth their weight in silver), and built the Big House. And for one year he courted the dark Dutch girl Margaret, having been unable to board her as he had all other girls.

She refused him because he had killed her father, because he had destroyed the *Luchtkastell* which was Family and Nation to her, and because he had stolen her island.

This Margaret, though she was pretty and trim as a *kuching*, had during the affair of the *Feathered Snake* and the *Luchtkastell* twirled three scamen in the air like pinwheels at one time and thrown them all into the ocean. She had eyes that twinkled like the compounded eyes of the devil-fish; they could glint laughter and fury at the same time.

"Those girls were like volcanoes," the man said. "Slim, strong mountains, and we climbed them like mountains. Man, the uplift on them! The shoulders were cliffs that laughed. The swaying—"

No, no! Betay that last paragraph! That's from the ramble of the fellow in the bar, and it keeps intruding.

"I forgot to tell you that she reminds me of *Wonder Woman*," Galli said.

Willy Jones believed that Margaret was worth winning unbroken, as he was not at all sure that he could break her. He courted her as well as he could, and he used to advantage the background of the golden-green spicery on which they lived.

"Imagine about the *Permata* bird that nests on the moon," Galli said, "and which is the most passionate as well as the noblest-singing of the birds. Imagine about flute notes soaring."

Willy Jones made this tune to Margaret:

The Nutmeg Moon is the third moon of the year.
The Tides come in like loose Silk all its Nights.

The Ground is animated by the bare Feet of Margaret
Who is like the *Pelepab* of the *Ko-eng* Flower.

Willy made this tune in the Malaya language in which all the words end in *ang*.

"Imagine about water leaping down rocky hills," Galli said. "Imagine about red birds romping in green groves."

Willy Jones made another tune to Margaret:

A Woman with Shoulders so strong that a Man
might ride upon them

The while she is still the little Girl watching for the
black Ship

Of the Hero who is the same age as the Sky.

But she does not realize that I am already here.

Willy made this tune in the Dutch language in which all the words end in *tjik*.

"Imagine about another flute joining the first one, and their notes scamper like birds," Galli said.

Willy Jones made a last tune to Margaret:

Damnation! That is enough of Moonlight and
Tomorrows!

Now there are mats to plait, and *kain* to sew.
Even the smallest crab knows to build herself a
house in the sand.

Margaret should be raking the oven coals and
baking a *roti*.

I wonder why she is so slow in seeing this.

Willy made this tune in the Welsh language in which all the words end in *gwbl*.

When the one year was finished, they were mated. There was still the chilliness there as though she would never forgive him for killing her father and stealing her island; but they began to be in accord.

* * *

"Here pause five minutes to indicate an idyllic interlude," Galli said. "We sing the song *Bagang Kali Berjumpa* if you know the tune. We flute, if I have my flute."

The idyllic interlude passed.

Then Willy's old ship, the *Feathered Snake*, came back to the Island. She was in a pitiful state of misuse. She reeked of old and new blood, and there were none left on her but nine sick men. These nine men begged Willy Jones to become their captain again to set everything right.

Willy washed the nine living skeletons and fed them up for three days. They were fat and able by then. And the three golems had refitted the ship.

"All she needs is a strong hand at the helm again," said Willy Jones. "I will sail her again for a week and a day. I will impress a new crew, and once more make her the terror of the Spice Islands. Then I will return to my island, knowing that I have done a good deed in restoring the *Snake* to the bloody work for which she was born."

"If you go, Willy Jones, you will be gone for many years," said the dark Dutch Margaret.

"Only one at the most," said Willy.

"And I will be in my grave when you return."

"There is no grave could hold you, Margaret."

"Aye, it may not hold me. I'll out of it and confront you when you come back. But it gives one a weirdness to be in the grave for only a few years. I will not own you for my husband when you do come back. You will not even know whether I am the same woman that you left, and you will never know. I am a volcano, but I banked my hatred and accepted you. But if you leave me now, I will erupt against you forever."

But Willy Jones went away in the *Flying Serpent* and left her there. He took two of the golems with him, and he left one of them to serve Margaret.

What with one thing and another, he was gone for twenty years.

"We were off that morning to satisfy our curiosity about the Big House," the fellow said, "since we would soon be leaving the island forever. You know about the Big House. You were on Willy Jones Island too. The Jilolos call it the House of Skulls, and the Malaya and Indonesian people will not speak about it at all."

"We approached the Big House that was not more than a mile beyond our perimeter. It was a large decayed building, but we had the sudden feeling that it was still inhabited. And it wasn't supposed to be. Then we saw the two of them, the mother and the daughter. We shook like we were unhinged, and we ran to them.

"They were so alike that we couldn't tell them apart. Their eyes twinkled like the compounded eyes of a creature that eats her mate. Noonday lightning! How it struck! Arms that swept you off your feet and set your bones to singing! We knew that they were not twins, or even sisters. We knew that they were mother and daughter.

"I have never encountered anything like them in my life! Whatever happened to the other two soldiers, I know it was worth it to them. Whatever happened, I don't care if they kill me! They were perfect, those two women, even though we weren't with them for five minutes."

"Then it was the Badger."

No, no, no! That's the wrong story again. That's not the story Galli told me. That's part of the story the fellow told me in the bar. His confused account keeps interposing itself, possibly because I knew him slightly when we were both soldiers on Willy Jones Island. But he had turned queer, that fellow. "It is the earthquake belt around the world that is the same as the legend belt," he said, "and the Middleworld underlies it all. That's why I was able to walk it." It was as though he had been keelhauled around the world. I hadn't known him well. I didn't know which of the first three soldiers he was. I had heard that they were all dead.

* * *

"Imagine about conspiracy stuff now," said Galli. "Imagine about a whispering in a pinang grove before the sun is up."

"How can I spook that man?" Margaret asked her golem shortly after she had been abandoned by Willy Jones. "But I am afraid that a mechanical man would not be able to tell me how."

"I will tell you a secret," said the golem. "We are not mechanical men. Certain wise and secret men believe that they made us, but they are wrong. They have made houses for us to live in, no more. There are many of us unhoused spirits, and we take shelter in such bodies as we find. That being so, I know something of the houseless spirits in the depth of every man. I will select one of them, and we will spook Willy Jones with that one. Willy is a Welshman who has become by adoption a Dutchman and a Malayan and a Jilolo man. There is one old spook running through them all. I will call it up when it is time."

"I forgot to tell you that the name of Margaret's golem was Meshuarat," Galli said.

After twenty years of high piracy, Willy Jones returned to his Island. And there was the dark Dutch Margaret standing as young and as smouldering as when he had left. He leapt to embrace her, and found himself stretched flat on the sand by a thunderous blow.

He was not surprised, and was not (as he had at first believed) decapitated. Almost he was not displeased. Margaret had often been violent in her love-making.

"But I will have you," Willy swore as he tasted his own blood delightfully in his mouth and pulled himself up onto hands and knees. "I have ridden the Margaret-tiger before."

"You will never ride my loins, you lecherous old goat," she rang at him like a bell. "I am not your wife. I am the daughter that you left here in the womb. My mother is in the grave on the hill."

Willy Jones sorrowed terribly, and he went to the grave.

But Margaret came up behind him and drove in the cruel lance. "I told you that when you came back you

would not know whether I was the same woman you had left," she chortled, "and you will never know!"

"Margaret, you are my wife!" Willy Jones gasped.

"Am I of an age to be your wife?" she jibed. "Regard me! Of what age do I seem to be?"

"Of the same age as when I left," said Willy. "But perhaps you have eaten of the besok nut and so do not change your appearance."

"I forgot to tell you about the besok nut," said Galli. "If one eats the nut of the besok tree, the tomorrow tree, the time tree, that one will not age. But this is always accompanied by a chilling unhappiness."

"Perhaps I did eat it," said Margaret. "But that is my grave there, and I have lain in it many years, as has she. You are prohibited from touching either of us."

"Are you the mother or the daughter, Witch?"

"You will never know. You will see us both, for we take turns, and you will not be able to tell us apart. See, the grave is always disturbed, and the entrance is easy."

"I'll have the truth from the golem who served you while I was gone," Willy swore.

"A golem is an artificial man," said Galli. "They were made by the Jews and Arabs in earlier ages, but now they say that they have forgotten how to make them. I wonder that you do not make them yourselves, for you have advanced techniques. You tell them and you picture them in your own heroic literature"—he patted the comic books under his arm—"but you do not have them in actuality."

The golem told Willy Jones that the affair was thus:

A daughter had indeed been born to Margaret. She had slain the child, and had then put it into the middle state. Thereafter, the child stayed sometimes in the grave, and sometimes she walked about the island. And she grew as any other child would. And Margaret herself had eaten the besok nut so that she would not age.

When mother and daughter had come to the same age and appearance (and it had only been the very day before that, the day before Willy Jones had returned), then the daughter had also eaten the besok nut. Now the mother and the daughter would be of the same appearance forever, and not even a golem could tell them apart.

Willy Jones came furiously onto the woman again.

"I was sure before, and now I am even more sure that you are Margaret," he said, "and now I will have you in my fury."

"We both be Margaret," she said. "But I am not the same one you apprehended earlier. We changed places while you talked to the golem. And we are both in the middle state, and we have both been dead in the grave, and you dare not touch either of us ever. A Welshman turned Dutchman turned Jilolo has this spook in him four times over. The Devil himself will not touch his own daughters."

The last part was a lie, but Willy Jones did not know it.

"We be in confrontation forever then," said Willy Jones. "I will make my Big House a house of hate and a house of

skulls. You cannot escape from its environs, neither can any visitor. I'll kill them all and pile their skulls up high for a monument to you."

Then Willy Jones ate a piece of bitter bark from the pokok ru.

"I forgot to tell you that when a person eats bark from the pokok ru in anger, his anger will sustain itself forever," Galli said.

"If it's visitors you want for the killing, I and my mother-daughter will provide them in numbers," said Margaret. "Men will be attracted here forever with no heed for danger. I will eat a telor tuntong of the special sort, and all men will be attracted here even to their death."

"I forgot to tell you that if a female eats the telor tuntong of the special sort, all males will be attracted irresistibly," Galli said. "Ah, you smile as though you doubted that the besok nut or the bark of the pokok ru or the telor tuntong of the special sort could have such effects. But yourselves come now to wonder drugs like little boys. In these islands they are all around you and you too blind to see. It is no ignorant man who tells you this. I have read the booklets from your orderly tents: *Physics without Mathematics*, *Cosmology without Chaos*, *Psychology without Brains*. It is myself, the master of all sciences and disciplines, who tells you that these things do work. Besides hard science, there is soft science, the science of shadow areas and story areas, and you do wrong to deny it the name."

"I believe that you yourself can see what had to follow, from the dispositions of the Margarets and Willy Jones," Galli said. "For hundreds of years, men from everywhere came to the Margarets who could not be resisted. And Willy Jones killed them all and piled up their skulls. It became, in a very savage form, what you call the Badger Game."

Galli was a good-natured and unhandsome brown man. He worked around the army base as translator, knowing (besides his native Jilolo) the Malayan, Dutch, Japanese and English languages, and (as every storyteller must) the Arabian. His English was whatever he wanted it to be, and he burlesqued the speech of the American soldiers to the Australians, and the Australians to the Americans.

"Man, it was a Badger!" the man said. "It was a grizzled-haired, glare-eyed, flat-headed, underslung, pigeon-toed, hook-clawed, clam-jawed Badger from Badger Game Corner! They moved in on us, but I'd take my chances and go back and do it again. We hadn't frolicked with the girls for five minutes when the Things moved in on us. I say Things; I don't know whether they were men or not. If they were, they were the coldest three men I ever saw. But they were directed by a man who made up for it. He was livid, hopping with hatred. They moved in on us and began to kill us."

No, no, that isn't part of Galli's story. That's some more of the ramble that the fellow told me in the bar the other evening.

* * *

It has been three hundred years, and the confrontation continues. There are skulls of Malayan men and Jilolo men piled up there; and of Dutchmen and Englishmen and of Portuguese men; of Chinamen and Philippinos and Goanese; of Japanese, and of the men from the United States and Australia.

"Only this morning there were added the skulls of two United States men, and there should have been three of them," Galli said. "They came, as have all others, because the Margarets ate the telor tuntong of the special sort. It is a fact that with a species (whether insect or shellled thing or other) where the male gives his life in the mating, the female has always eaten of this telor tuntong. You'd never talk the males into such a thing with words alone."

"How is it that there were only two United States skulls this morning, and there should have been three?" I asked him.

"One of them escaped," Galli explained, "and that was unusual. He fell through a hole to the middle land, that third one of them. But the way back from the middle land to one's own country is long, and it must be walked. It takes at least twenty years, wherever one's own country is; and the joke thing about it is that the man is always wanting to go the other way."

"That is the end of the story, but let it not end abruptly," Galli said. "Sing the song *Chari Yang Besar* if you remember the tune. Imagine about flute notes lingering in the air."

* * *

"I was lost for more than twenty years, and that's a fact," the man said. He gripped the bar with the most knotted hands I ever saw, and laughed with a merriment so deep that it seemed to be his bones laughing. "Did you know that there's another world just under the world, or just around the corner from it? I walked all day every day. I was in a torture, for I suspected that I was going the wrong way, and I could go no other. And I sometimes suspected that the middle land through which I traveled was in my head, a derangement from the terrible blow that one of the Things gave me as he came in to kill me. And yet there are correlates that convince me it was a real place."

"I wasn't trying to get home. I was trying to get back to those girls even if it killed me. There weren't any colors in that world, all gray tones, but otherwise it wasn't much different from this one. There were even bars there a little like the Red Rooster."

(I forgot to tell you that it was in the Red Rooster Bar that the soldier from the islands told me the parts of his story.)

* * *

"I've got to get back there. I think I know the way now, and how to get on the road. I have to travel it through the middle land, you know. They'll kill me, of course, and I won't even get to jazz those girls for five minutes; but I've got to get back there. Going to take me another twenty years, though. That sure is a weary walk."

* * *

I never knew him well, and I don't remember which of

the names was his. But a man from Orange, Texas, or from Gobey, Tennessee, or from Boston, in one of the eastern states, is on a twenty-year walk through the middle land to find the dark Dutch Margarets, and death.

I looked up a couple of things yesterday. There was Revel's recent work on Moluccan Narcotics. He tells of the Besok Nut which *does* seem to inhibit aging but which induces internal distraction and hypersexuality. There is the Pokok Ru whose bitter bark impels even the most gentle to violent anger. There is one sort of Telor Tuntong which sets up an inexplicable aura about a woman eater and draws all males overpoweringly to her. There is much research still to be done on these narcotics, Revel writes.

I dipped into Mandrago's *Earthquake and Legend and the Middle World*. He states that the earthquake belt around the world is also the legend belt, and that one of

the underlying legends is of the underlying land, the middle world below this world where one can wander lost forever.

And I went down to the Red Rooster again the next evening, which was last evening, to ask about the man and to see if he could give me a more cogent account. For I had remembered Galli's old story in the meanwhile.

"No, he was just passing through town," the barman said. "Had a long trip ahead of him. He was sort of a nutty fellow. I've often said the same thing about you."

* * *

That is the end of the other story, but let it not end suddenly. Pause for a moment to savor it. Sing the song *Itu Masa Dabulu* if you remember the tune.

Imagine about flute notes falling. I don't have a flute, but a story should end so. ♦



"There's a rather menacing cyborg from the future to see you, sir.
Shall I tell him to come back, say, yesterday?"

The Strange Case of Raphael Aloysius Lafferty

Michael Swanwick

A wanderer comes over the mountains to a settlement in a narrow valley and talks of a thing he has seen which he calls the sea. Everyone gathers around him to ask questions. What is it like? Is it beautiful? Is it cold? Is it like a pond? A prairie? A dream? Yes and no, he says, and tries to come up with a metaphor that will make sense of this vast elemental thing. But what he says makes no sense to his auditors. They have never seen the sea. They have never seen anything like it. His words baffle them.

They just don't get it.

I "got it" roughly twenty years ago, at the end of an R. A. Lafferty novel called *The Devil Is Dead*, which I had picked up because its cover promised a bright work of elemental fantasy. What it actually contained was a very strange and rambling narrative about a rowdy Irish lush named Finnegan. He wakes up from a bender with no memory of the recent past and slowly deduces himself to be in a Texas port city. He gets a job on a boat owned by a man named Papadiabolus who claims to be the Devil. He steals a car. He steals a gun. He steals a suitcase full of money. He kills some people. He has a lot of very odd conversations with very odd individuals who claim to be oreads, gargoyles, mermaids, changelings, and other nonhuman sorts but quite obviously are not.

As I read, I kept waiting for the fantasy element to kick in. So far as I

could tell, it never did. But the novel was quirky delightfully and I read it through to the end. And on the penultimate page, Finnegan explains to another character that almost all the significant characters in the novel are Neanderthals, genetic throwbacks to a race that's been hiding in the *Homo sapiens* bloodline and waging a covert war against humanity for 30,000 years. Mermaids, oreads, and other mythical species are all subspecies of the old race.

At which point I flipped to the opening chapter, and discovered that Lafferty had spelled out the entire thing on the very first page!

I've loved the man's work ever since.

The Devil Is Dead is out of print. So are *Past Master*, *Reefs of Earth*, *Space Chantey*, and many other Lafferty novels that you'd probably like. In fact, Lafferty, a Grand Master of Fantasy and one of the most acclaimed writers in science fiction, is currently as close to unpublishable as any good writer has ever been. Those of his works which are in print are small press publications, and among them are some of his most esoteric works—subtle and sophisticated books that I would not advise you to start out with.

How could this be? Well, to put it simply, Lafferty is too original a talent for the mass market. His work isn't anything like any other science fiction you've ever read. In fact, he entered the field almost by accident. As

he explained in an interview, "I started writing every kind of story, not just science fiction. I wrote *Saturday Evening Post* type stories and *American* type stories and *Colliers* type stories. Science fiction sold and the others didn't, so I concentrated on that." The books and stories he was writing weren't *really* science fiction or fantasy—they were Lafferties. But they could be mistaken for science fiction or fantasy.

For a time they were. Times changed, though, and readers grew less adventurous. Brilliant writers need brilliant readers, and there were not enough to keep Lafferty afloat. One by one, the major publishing houses gave up on him. Finally, he quit writing altogether.

Brilliant readers still exist, though, and I'm writing this on the off chance that you're one. If you read for enlightenment as well as pleasure, if you delight in being surprised, if you value new and challenging ideas and perspectives . . . well, you ought to give Lafferty a try. Unfortunately, not all of his work is equally accessible. Hence this essay. It's a sort of primer: a brief introduction to the man's art and overview of what's available, along with a few hints as to the best works to begin with. Since most of these books are hard to find, I've included addresses and ordering information at the end.

The first thing you need to know about R. A. Lafferty is that he's written some of the funniest stories the

field has ever seen. Humor is present in even the most serious of his work, but where it's overt it shines. The best way to appreciate this is to hunt up an out-of-print paperback collection called *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*. Among the treasures therein is "Seven-Day Terror," in which nine-year-old Clarence Willoughby builds a "disappearer" out of a beer can and two pieces of cardboard and proceeds to eliminate significant portions of his neighborhood. "Slow Tuesday Night" follows Basil Bagelbaker through a typical night in a vastly accelerated civilization, during which he cheerfully makes and loses four titanic fortunes, marries and divorces (maybe), rises to the top of society and finally goes to sleep in the gutter with a bottle of red-eye. As usual, "Guesting Time" makes a gleeful hash of every overpopulation story ever written. Ten billion humanoid aliens suddenly decide to drop in on Earth for a visit. In short order, there are several thousand visitors in every back yard, baths have become communal experiences, and idlers sit eight deep on the park benches. But the visitors are all such nice people that nobody minds these minor inconveniences. The eighteen other stories are equally strange, equally vivid, equally good.

There are several Lafferty collections currently in print, though none achieves the same dense concentration of his finest work that *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* has. When a man writes over two hundred stories, not all of them are going to be his best, and some are going to strike the uninitiated as downright cryptic. But if an unabridged "Best" is ever assembled, it will surely include "You Can't Go Back," about a child-scale moon that can be whistled down and visited, and "Selenium Ghosts of the Eighteen Seventies," a history of nineteenth-century television, from *Iron Tears* (Edgewood Press). It will also have "When All the Lands Pour Out Again," in which the day of Jubilee arrives and everyone and everything, people and continents alike, decide to be something else; "One Day at a Time," about a happy man who buries himself in the ground for decades at a time; and "The Hole on

the Corner," in which a flaw in the parallel dimensions causes a second Homer Hoose to return home, indistinguishable from the first, though he does have tentacles and unfortunate appetites, from *Lafferty in Orbit* (Broken Mirrors Press). It would probably include his anti-drug allegory "Sky" and certainly "Eureka's Dam" from *Golden Gate and Other Stories* (Corroboree Press).

This last, by the way, is an excellent example of Lafferty's skewed but ruthless logicality. The plot concerns a boy so stupid that the only way he can pass an exam is by creating a device small enough to hide in his pencil that will analyze the questions and then wiggle his hand into writing the correct answers in a fair version of his own handwriting. It is the story's thesis that inventions are produced by the incompetent. The Athenians invented nothing, for they could do all things well without help. The first invention, after all, was a crutch. And it was not made by a well man. As the protagonist's misrecollection of the old adage puts it, "Stupidity is the mother of invention."

Even in synopsis these are extraordinary stories. But it is the wry wit and deadpan irony of the tall-tale narrative voice—these are stories that cry out to be read aloud—that makes them exceptional. Here, from "When All the Lands Pour Out Again," a character recounts his conversation with the president, who has decided to get into a large airplane with both houses of Congress and fly away:

"Where will you go in the plane, Mr. President?" I asked. "I am not sure about that," he said. "Is it important which way a plane goes? There are several dissidents who see no reason to get on a plane and go somewhere today. There are always dissidents in government. They say that nothing has happened. I tell them that if all of us get on a plane and go somewhere that that will be something happening. It is possible that the pilot will know where the plane is going. If he does not, then perhaps someone will instruct." That is what the president said. He didn't seem to be his usual incisive self this morning.

(This particular passage, by the way, was even funnier when Richard Nixon was in office.)

Collections I have not seen include *Through Elegant Eyes: Tales of Austro and the Men Who Knew Everything* (Corroboree Press), and Chris Drumm's chapbook collections of original stories, most of them appearing nowhere else: *Heart of Stone, Dear and Other Stories; Snake in His Bosom and Other Stories; The Man Who Made Models and Other Stories*; and *Slippery and Other Stories*. United Mythologies has *Mischief Malicious*, as well as the chapbook collections *The Early Lafferty, The Early Lafferty II*, and *The Back Door of History*. Collectors and completists will want them all.

As the above suggests, Lafferty was a prolific writer, and short fiction is only a fraction of his total output. He has also written thirty-some novels, several yet unpublished. Fortunately, his single finest and most accessible is currently available from the University of Oklahoma Press.

Oklahoma Hannalli is a work of historical fiction, and not a fantasy at all, unless you count magical realism as fantasy (but it predates the awareness of magical realism in this country by many years). And as a historical novel, it is exemplary. The research behind his depiction of the Choctaw people was so exacting that for a time it was generally thought in Oklahoma that Lafferty was an Indian himself, and Native Americans would call him up to settle barroom arguments about their history.

The novel covers roughly a hundred years—the nineteenth century—of shameful treatment of the Choctaw and other native peoples by the American government. But while Lafferty does not shrink from the events, what really interests him is examining what kind of *people* the Choctaw were and are. To do so he created Hannalli Innominee, a character who manages the almost miraculous feat of being both comic and imposing, a fat Indian ("There's a lot of them," a Chickasaw Indian said of them once. "Not so many," someone protested, "only a few thousand of them left." "I don't mean in numbers,"

the Chickasaw said, 'I mean the way one of them's heaped together. Man, there's a lot of them!') with enormous talents, great virtues, and the occasional weakness. He's also good company. Here, in his pushed-together way of talking, Hannali regrets a rash string of decisions:

"I am marry to three women and how did it happen to me I was not intend to marry at all Marie DuShane thinks that Martha Louisiana is my slave and Natchez is my cousin Natchez I don't know what she thinks only Martha Louisiana knows she says she will knock their heads together if they don't like it what am I a herd bull to have three calves coming all the same season God help me I don't know how I get into this I'm so dumb what am I a jack I get three colts in one year damn this is bad why was I not think what am I a cob turkey to have three hens they point me out hoy you old jack you they say how you go to unfry fish how you go to unbake bread how you get out of this one Hannali what am I an old boar coon."

Hannali's love life is only a fractional—though entertaining—part of the narrative. He also plants corn, raises hogs, rears children, defends his family and people, adopts strangers, enters politics, meets great men, travels, fights, and does a hundred things more, all of genuine interest. Gradually he becomes a great man himself. Finally, he dies well.

Often Lafferty has been too imaginative for his own commercial good, shedding wild ideas and strange whimsies with such abandon that many readers simply couldn't keep up. But in *Okla Hannali* the need to stay true to the historical facts and to the character of the Choctaw people results in a straightforward narrative in which the tragedies are irreversible, the joys undeniable, and the fate of virtually all the characters, minor as well as major, truly matters to the reader. For plot alone, this is one great book. As history, it's a revelation.

But there's more. In a quick bit of self-criticism in *East of Laughter*, Lafferty says of his stand-in, "In particular, he lacks the talent for creat-

ing characters. Oh, his folks are a grubby lot! He has staying power, but that's all. His mind is altogether second class." And, though it hurts to say this, there are books in which this pretty much holds true, where his characters are didactic mouthpieces, hastily sketched-in and hard to tell apart. But in Hannali Innominee he has created a genuinely great character, a true American hero and eccentric, and one of a handful of fictional people in this century who deserve literary immortality.

With one notable exception, Lafferty's works fall naturally into three categories: the Comedies, the Histories, and the Religious Dramas. The three fade one into the other, and it's a rare work that is totally innocent of any one, but for the most part it's a division that works. So just for the moment, I'll stay with the Histories.

The Flame Is Green (*Corrohoree*) is one of Lafferty's great works, marred only by the fact that since it is the first of a tetralogy it does not so much end as come to an abrupt stop.

Ostensibly, *Flame* is a historical novel set in the 1840s, a time when decent citizens were still shocked to encounter industrialists outside of their native caves and trying to pass for human. It was also a period in European history of greater interest than is commonly imagined. Dana Cosquin, an Irish hero and as naive and likeable a protagonist as one could wish for, is recruited into a mysterious worldwide revolution. (There are two going on simultaneously; his is the Green flame rather than its opposite, the Red.) Dana is quickly caught up in the world of bomb-throwing, desperate midnight gallops, and the cheery slaughter of enemies. This is a conservative religious war at heart—Karl Marx is mentioned in passing as a minor villain—but I promise you this does not get in the way of the bloodletting. Quite the opposite. As is explained of two of his fellow revolutionaries:

Neither of these persons would ever be able to do an unkind thing. There is reason to believe that they sometimes had to kill in Brume's dimly understood multinational business. There is a cer-

tainty that they sometimes had to rob selected persons and destroy selected property. They were fearless and widely feared. But they were incapable of any unkindness.

For all that Lafferty is a Christian believer, there's a lot of pagan vitality in his work. *The Flame Is Green* in particular is shot through with a startling sensuality. "This is my heart outside my body," the villainess Elena Prado tells Dana of one particular room in her casa. "It is my body and extension of my body, my own place. And you may enter it any time you wish, any way you wish." Small wonder that he falls from grace with her from time to time.

But the Good are not deprived of the pleasures of the flesh either. Here, Dana and his new bride strip to the waist and fence with sharpened rapiers:

Dana drew blood on Catherine. She was statuesque, scarlet on ivory now. Her throat, her bosom were statued perfection, firm beyond belief, and Dana added deep red color to them . . . With any other couple there would be something a little wrong about this. With them, in their private passion, there was not. Catherine stuck her tongue out impishly, and Dana flicked it with his rapier's point, starting a fine red ribbon.

I can't speak for you, but before this and similar passages, I can only stand appalled with admiration.

Lafferty's greatest accomplishment in *The Flame Is Green* is taking a half-decade of European history, interpreting it as one coherent cultural and philosophic clash, and making its relevance to the contemporary world self-evident. But above all, this is a fast-action fantasy, with impossibly zestful villains (led by one Ifreann Chortovitch, who is literally the Son of the Devil), heroes and giants, conversations with dead men, hair-sbreadth escapes, sly wit and bloody duels. Dana dies in chapter one, but luckily it doesn't take.

Half a Sky, also from Corrohoree, continues the sequence. The last two books, alas, are still unpublished. But in partial compensation, that most sought-after and hardest to find of all published Laffertys, *The Fall of Rome*,

which was originally published as a straight historical text, complete with an index, is forthcoming from United Mythologies, under the author's original title *Alaric*. (As of my writing, it was scheduled for the fall of 1993. Given the realities of small-press publishing, it may or may not be available. Write and ask.)

Alaric is a fantasy novel disguised as a biography of Alaric the Goth, the first barbarian to conquer the Eternal City, and it is another of Lafferty's greatest works. The marketing decisions of its first publisher notwithstanding, it is by no definition nonfiction. For though Lafferty sticks to the facts where they are known, he feels free to make up his own where they are not.

Ah, but which claims are fantasy, and which truth? From an interview I know that the section where the master general Stilicho harries Alaric through Greece and is robbed of total victory by a trick that Lafferty must pause to give the history of chess to explain (a tale so good I've told it to my nine-year-old son as a bedtime story) is a fiction. But what of Alaric's encounter with his father, seven years dead, at the mouth of the underworld? Is the event itself an invention, or is the invention Lafferty's suggestion that the affair may have been fraudulent?

The era under question was one in which miracles and wonders were accepted as commonplace truth. Thus the fantasy elements introduced into the narration are less likely to be the visions, ghosts, prophecies and miraculous storms—such things are a matter of historical record—than the attribution of comprehensible motivations, doubts, and emotions to people whose private feelings are long ages lost to us. There are times, indeed, when the text comes within a whisper of reconstructing the exact dialogue.

It's a cunning game that Lafferty plays here. Over and over, the phrase "this cannot be known" appears, implicitly assuring the reader of the veracity of what remains. Then the tale picks its way carefully through the possibilities, tweaking a fact here, foreshadowing a death there, revising a personality in the third place,

until the overall shape is one of Lafferty's devising.

The plot is helped along by short lectures on the history of stirrups, the virtues of the poet Claudian, the Goths as wagoners, the proper ratio of slaves to citizens, and the multiple meanings and ultimate untranslatability of the Latin word *res*, or "thing." Indeed, a good half of the pleasure of reading *Alaric* lies in these asides. It is in them that the ancient world is recreated in all its alien splendor, more fantastic than any fairytale kingdom and stranger than dragons.

"This is the Master Narration of the Happenings. It is my own narration and it contains in itself all the narrations of baser persons." Thus begins *Sindbad, the Thirteenth Voyage* (*Broken Mirrors*). In fact, the novel begins thus four times, with only minor variations in the establishing page or so of prose: The same speech is made by the Caliph Mamun the great, by Scheherazade, by Essindibad Copperbottom of the planet Kentauron Mikron sometimes known as Sindbad the Sailor, and by John Scarlatti Thunderson of North Chicago who claims to be the real Sindbad by right of usurpation. *Sindbad* can best be summed up as an act of literary legerdemain, a postmodern tall tale narrated in alternating voices that chime and clash against each other. The action takes place in the Magic City of Baghdad, which its inhabitants all cheerily agree is a mirage.

There's a lot of fun in this book, particularly in the character of Scheherazade, a plump young woman from Dover Delaware and Edmond Oklahoma, among other places, who swashbuckles her way through the chase scenes by the judicious application of adjectives and adjustments of characterization. Here in the midst of an underground space-ship race to the gates of Hell, she sets the scene for the coming fight:

And now I wonder whether I couldn't do something about this subterranean exterior world, this stygian underworld through which we're sailing . . . Let us just have a small sun or moon in the low rock sky that covers us. Oh, oh, yes, that is well done, in an

evil sort of way. It's an ashen, garish moon, evil beyond compare. This is a structurally tricky book, taking as its model the bottle that swallows the genie many times its size, a literary Moebius knot with several endings that reinterpret all that has come before. Like all serious postmodernist works (but I suspect it lay in a trunk for a few decades waiting for postmodernism to be invented), *Sindbad* is a kind of vaudeville, with texts that draw attention to themselves, contradict and undercut the validity of each other, and set up expectations only to challenge them. I'm not at all sure I understand it myself.

A dizzying read, and not for the faint of heart. But it demonstrates well the second thing you must know to understand Lafferty: He is a literary sophisticate. Behind his campfire-tale prose (this is a man heavily influenced by the oral tradition), his corny jokes, his back-porch rhetoric, lurks a true artist, with all the reluctance to explain and ruthless intolerance for convention of the true artist. His work is only superficially simple; inside, it is richly complex and the more the reader brings to the reading the more will be found there. This is a man you underestimate at your own peril.

The third and last major thing-to-realize about Lafferty is that all of his work has a religious component if you scratch deep enough, and that it is his overtly religious fiction that genre readers will find most puzzling. As is readily apparent in what many regard as his single most challenging work,

More Than Melchesedeck is a single novel broken into three elegantly slim hardcover volumes (*Tales of Chicago*, *Tales of Midnight*, and *Argo*, all from United Mythologies). Here is the tale of Duffy Melchesedeck, the Boy-King of Salem, who has voyaged on the *Argo* and had three concurrent boyhoods in Boston, St. Louis, and Iowa. To try to synopsize the plot or list the dozens of significant characters would do no good at all. Suffice it to say that it's a religious—conservative Roman Catholic, to be specific— allegory (or "se-

cret history," as he would say) of the Twentieth Century and criticism and satire of Western culture. This is Lafferty's *Summa Theologica*, the Everest of Lafferty scholarship, a dense, interlocking thicket of symbolism straight from the heart of the philosophies behind his fiction.

Fittingly enough, this is not only a religious work but a comic and—in a low-keyed way—a historical one as well. It is also as postmodern as they come, with variant texts, multiple pasts, and conflicting memory-lines. Even identity itself shifts underfoot from time to time. There is no major theme in the Laffertian opus that is not to be found in concentrated form in *More Than Melchesedek*.

For the serious student this book is a must. But I could not in good conscience recommend it to the casual reader. For all his lightness of tone, Lafferty is an extremely learned man, erudite in the oddly crammed way that only an autodidact can be. He throws out ideas and references like sparks, and lets those who can decode their fire. In *Sindbad*, one character challenged to explain herself exclaims, "The message? Oh no, the message is too intricate to give in easy words. You must work for it." For those willing to put in the work, there are treasures here. But it will not be light work.

Related works include the novel *Dotty*, the novella *Episodes of the Argo*, which is an outtake from *Argo* and the closest thing there is to a key to the mythologies of the sequence, and the chapbook novelettes "How Many Miles to Babylon?" and "Promontory Goats" (all from United Mythologies).

Having tackled *More Than Melchesedek* (but I would not advise anyone to take the books in this order), I was able to breeze right through the two religious fantasies available from Morgan, *Serpent's Egg* and *East of Laughter*. Both are what might be called ensemble works, with a large cast of protagonists rather than one central focus character. *Serpent's Egg* begins with three children, participants in an experiment to improve (only not too much) human potential. One is a test-tube boy, the second an

Unfallen ape, and the third a computer in the form of a little girl. But no sooner are they established as characters than their experiment is merged with three others, so that we also deal with a parrot, an angel, a seal, a wolverine (or wolverine-were, since it turns into a boy when the moon is full), a pythoness, a bear, a chimpanzee, a human girl, and an unborn elephant. At first blush this seems an almost willful attempt to confound the reader.

But there may be fewer characters here than meet the eye. In an afterword to *Argo*, Lafferty explains that he believes in the multiplicity of people, for which reason his work is filled with "split-offs," ghosts, and doppelgangers. So perhaps it's best to take his multiple-protagonists as being simply a play of aspects or archetypes that together make up a single human soul.

And the plot? Well, it's a sort of puppet-show or *commedia dell' arte* masque, with bright farcical action overlying serious depths. One in a thousand Experimental Children will be a "serpent's egg," an individual with too vital an insight to be tolerated by a militantly secular society, and thus their growth is carefully monitored by assassins. While the children wait to see who will survive, Inneal the computer-girl creates her own ocean and convinces her adoptive father to give her a yacht for a pirate ship. The children coat it with invisible paint. Gajah, the unborn elephant, is assassinated. Whales build a new undersea city. Everybody prepares for the ultimate conflict.

Read as a genre fantasy, *Serpent's Egg* would be one puzzling book indeed. But after *More Than Melchesedek*, it's obvious that the invisible pirate ship *Annabella Saint Ledger* from the deck of which the inept prophet Invisible Albert preaches is metaphoric for the Church, that the twelve protagonists are meant to evoke the apostles and thus any community of the devout, and that the ambulatory computer-people who are too elegant to believe in the existence of human beings are a satire on atheists.

This is, however, not your typical religious fiction, but something more

like an Oceanic dream. The narration moves from strange event to stranger, like the voice in a dream obsessively explaining each new implausibility with fresh-minted dream-logic, and the effect is weird, unworldly, bewailing.

East of Laughter also has twelve protagonists (fifteen by some counts, but the death count is high, so the number is fluid), adults this time. Their problem is that they're not real. As one character puts it, "I'm dreaming, Jane Chantal. By the thirty tests that I have applied to myself, I'm thirty times dreaming. The whole texture of my life is a dream. But will I know reality if I meet it? What if reality came knocking at my door in the middle of the night? What if it knocks like a giant stone hammer and splinters the door in?" Which is as neat a metaphor for the religious impulse as could be desired.

So they embark on a quest for reality. Simultaneously, the seven Scribbling Giants, who sustain the world by writing its scenarios and futures, one by one begin to die. The two plot-threads are clearly related.

A quirky wit runs through this book. Somebody explains the need for religion by saying, "When we wade out where the waters of survival are more than arse-deep, forget your science! Latch onto something more aerated, something with more flotation to it." Charles Fort makes a cameo appearance and when asked what he's leading up to replies, "I have no idea." An irit wonders, "Are those last nine billion galaxy groups really essential to the punchline of the anecdote of existence?" And who else but Lafferty would tell you that the way to keep your computer from getting lonely is to stable it with a goat?

These are not the pious, easy works that many of us, fairly or not, expect from religious fiction. They are tricky, twisty things, full of surprises and reversals of expectations. At the end of *Serpent's Egg*, it is admitted that half of what has been told is lies, and it is left to the reader to decide which half. In *East of Laughter* one character gives voice to Lafferty's literary side when he says, "It almost seems that we are no more

than characters in a big sprawling novel that Atrox and perhaps some of his friends are writing. It's an idea that I try to chase away by throwing rocks at it, and it squawks and flies right back to me."

To which another character replies in Lafferty's religious voice, "It is more likely that we are all no more than characters in a big sprawling novel that God is writing."

The Elliptical Grave (United Mythologies) is an extreme example of the ensemble approach—twenty-three major characters in one hundred pages! A group of academics floats an archaeological dig in the Calabria region of Italy, where the ghosts outnumber the living two to one, and no experience can be trusted to be real. They excavate the earth, "the haunted air," and the noosphere above. Demonic enemies set a trap for them. But the plot, while it has event enough for any novel, is but a framework on which to hang a running series of colloquies on language, theology, and human potential (among other topics), all coded in Lafferty's private symbology.

Not exactly easy going. But again, scholars will find this one of particular interest. Lafferty's signature obsessions all appear here: the flashy and superior people who fail miserably, the continued existence of nonhuman races, the razor-sedge division between damnation and salvation, the apocalyptic climax, and much, much more besides.

This thematic density is bought at a price, though, and that price is clarity of character. "Are our faces too much alike?" somebody asks at one point. "Are we becoming a single vine with all of our calyx-faces identical?"

Well, yes. But that may be precisely the point.

Earlier I mentioned one exception to the division of Lafferty's *oeuvre* into Comedies, Histories and Religious Dramas. That exception is called *My Heart Leaps Up*, and while it can be read as an odd mix of all three, ultimately it evades categorization.

My Heart Leaps Up (Chris Drumm) is the first book of a four-volume auto-biographical sequence—the other

three are forthcoming—collectively titled *In a Green Tree*. The first thing you'll notice about this novel is that it's not a book. Chris Drumm has for reasons of his own published it in a sequence of five pamphlets or chapbooks, each containing two chapters of the whole.

The second thing you'll notice is that Lafferty himself is hard to locate in this book, though a shrewd guess might be made. He is writing not about himself but about his childhood, and the sources of his fiction shine through. The novel covers all of grammar school from first grade through graduation, with emphasis on the lies, tall tales, fantasies, and pranks the students tell to and play on each other, with a fair dollop of precocious sex thrown in. These are the author's "stretcher" shrunk down to a child's stature, but still recognizable for all of that. Some touches, such as the three kites permanently anchored in the flying field, soaring too high to be seen without a telescope, one with a child's skeleton still clutching its tail, are particularly fine. Again, this is not a book I would recommend anyone start out with. But as a catalog of his early influences, an examination of sources and well-heads, it holds particular fascination. It is the master's spacious world writ small.

Having reached the beginning, it is time to stop.

The narration is over. The wanderer lapses into silence. He knows he hasn't done a very good job. His audience has been extremely patient—you've been extremely patient—but the essence, the heart of the thing has slipped away, and maybe it's something that can only be put into the words contained within the books themselves.

Still, there has to be a summation, an attempt to put in a few simple words what the author is getting at with his dozens of books and hundreds of stories, and what his virtues are. So I will borrow a pair of quotes from the man himself, and let him have the last word.

"The people of the world are none of them common, are all of them geniuses, are all of them wonderful."

Lafferty has written, and at its best his fiction conveys this strange and clear-eyed insight. In a short story called "Through Other Eyes," an inventor creates a Cerebral Scanner that will allow him to look through the eyes of others in order to experience the wonder of their universes. Which is a singularly apt metaphor for Lafferty's fiction. Reading his stories, experiencing his vision, I can only echo his inventor, who of one subject says wonderfully, "I am looking through the inspired and almost divine eyes of a giant and I am looking at a world that has not yet grown tired."

LAFFERTY IN PRINT:

(Several of the following works are also available in higher-priced signed and numbered editions. I have not listed these, but collectors may want to ask. There are also a number of nonfiction chapbooks by and about R. A. Lafferty available from United Mythologies Press and Chris Drumm Books.)

BROKEN MIRRORS PRESS

Lafferty in Orbit (\$13.95 + \$1.00 P&H, hc)
Sindbad, the Thirteenth Voyage (\$9.95 + \$1.00 P&H, ph)

Broken Mirrors Press
P. O. Box 380473
Cambridge MA 02238

* * *

CHRIS DRUMM BOOKS

Chapbooks:
My Heart Leaps Up (\$16.00, set of five chapbooks)

Heart of Stone, Dear and Other Stories (\$2.00)

Snake in His Bosom and Other Stories (\$2.00)

The Man Who Made Models and Other Stories (\$2.50)

Slippery and Other Stories (\$2.00)
(Add \$1.00 per order for P&H)

Chris Drumm Books
P. O. Box 445
Polk City IA 50226

Michael Swanwick

CORROBOREE PRESS

The Flame Is Green (\$25.00 + \$3.50 P&H, hc)

Half a Sky (\$25.00 + \$3.50 P&H, hc)

Through Elegant Eyes (\$20.00 + \$3.50 P&H, signed & numbered hc)

Golden Gate & Other Stories (\$20.00 + \$3.50 P&H, signed & numbered hc)

DreamHaven Books
1309 4th Street SE
Minneapolis MN 55414

* * *

EDGEWOOD PRESS

Iron Tears (\$10.00 + \$1.50 P&H, \$2.00 Canada, \$5.00 overseas, pb)

Edgewood Press
P.O. Box 264
Cambridge MA 02238

* * *

MORRIGAN PUBLICATIONS

East of Laughtter (£10.95; postage at cost, hc)

Serpent's Egg (£10.95; postage at cost, hc)

Morrigan Publications
84 Ivy Avenue
Bath, Avon
BA2 1AN
United Kingdom

* * *

UNITED MYTHOLOGIES PRESS

Episodes of the Argo (\$13.00, P&H included, pb)
Dotty (\$16.50, P&H included, pb)
The Elliptical Grave (\$16.50, P&H included, pb)
Mischief Malicious (\$14.50, P&H included, pb)
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Tales of Chicago (\$19.95 + \$3.00 P&H, hc)
Tales of Midnight (\$19.95 + \$3.00 P&H, hc)
Argo (\$19.95 + \$3.00 P&H, hc)

Chapbooks:

The Early Lafferty (\$3.50, P&H included)
The Early Lafferty II (\$4.50, P&H included)

Promontory Goats (\$3.50, P&H included)

How Many Miles to Babylon? (\$3.50, P&H included)

The Back Door of History (\$3.50, P&H included)

Forthcoming:

Alaric (originally *The Fall of Rome*)

United Mythologies
Box 79777
Old Weston Post Office
1995 Weston Road
Weston, Ontario
Canada M9N 3W9

* * *

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS

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P.O. Box 787
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Dances with Gravity

Stephen L. Gillett

The Solar System was once the metaphor for the Clockwork Universe. But it changes over time, and in fact its long-term stability is now a serious research issue. One reason for this, of course, is that there are more than two bodies interacting gravitationally. Only the two-body system, with the elliptical orbits first discovered by Kepler, can be solved exactly. Add a third body and no such solution exists. The system is chaotic, as I described in a previous column ("Courting Chaos," October 1991).

Or rather, most solutions are chaotic. There are stable positions for a third body in a two-body system. To visualize these points, imagine two equilateral triangles joined along one edge. Now call the two large bodies the primary (biggest) and secondary (second biggest). If the primary and the secondary are at the vertexes at each end of the joined edges, then the stable points are at the isolated vertexes. As many of you already know, these are the Lagrange-4 and Lagrange-5 (L-4 and L-5, for short) points, named after the French physicist who discovered them mathematically in the 18th century.

So, another possibility is satellites at the L-4 and L-5 points. Jupiter has such companions at both points, the so-called Trojan asteroids. (So called because they're named after heroes in the Trojan War.) Over the last 10 years or so, too, astronomers have searched off and on for debris at Earth's L-4 and L-5 ("Trojan") points, along its orbit around the Sun. (No

luck so far.) And of course, the Trojan points in the Earth-Moon system were proposed as sites for space colonies back in the 70's. (Saturn's moon Tethys actually has natural L-4 and L-5 companions, and another moon, Dione, has an L-4 companion.)

In a real solar system, which consists of more than just three bodies, the Trojan points are not always stable. To a first approximation, for something at a Trojan point to remain there indefinitely the mass of the secondary must be less than about 4.0% of the primary. (And the mass of the body at the Trojan point must be negligible.) Otherwise, perturbations from the gravity of other objects will cause the Trojan to wander away. As it is, even permanent Trojan bodies can wander quite a ways from the exact L-4 or L-5 point. They actually orbit around the point. Some of the Trojan asteroids, for example, can at times be farther from their Lagrange point than the Earth is from the Sun!

Since all the planets have less than 4.0% the mass of the Sun, all their Trojan points should be stable—to this first approximation, anyway. But so far only Jupiter is known to have Trojan companions. But even bits of debris a few hundred meters across at Earth's Trojan points would be really nice for space development scenarios, so it's still worth looking.

Elsewhere, we can imagine Earth-like planets in a Trojan orbit with two stars—Poul Anderson wrote a story once in this setting. But because of

that 4.0% secondary-to-primary limit, we really can't speak of two *stars*, because stars (at least those with Earthlike planets) don't vary in mass that much. For example, if the primary were the size of the Sun, the secondary could have at most only 4% of the Sun's mass; and that's not quite enough to light the nuclear fires. It would be an object between a planet and a star, a so-called "brown dwarf."

Still, it might glow deep, dull red, from heat released by gravitational energy when it accreted. And in any case it could be seen easily from the night sky of the Earthlike planet, as it would reflect the primary's light. Like Venus and Mercury in our own system, it could never appear in the midnight sky; it would always be a morning or evening star. On the other hand, being so big it might well be bright enough to be visible in full daylight. No doubt many legends would arise about this brilliant, unusual object—the Daystar. (A bigger question would be whether an Earthlike planet could accrete in a Trojan position in the first place, but we don't know for sure it's impossible.)

The Lagrange points are pretty pedestrian, though, being a specific, non-chaotic solution of the 3-body problem. So let's now look at some more exotic possibilities.

One such is the intricate dances of the rings upon rings around Saturn: a system whose present—not to mention long-term!—stability is not fully understood, just because of its mathematical complexity. (Of course, the

rings consists of millions of separate tiny satellites, each in its own orbit.)

One problem with understanding rings has been what keeps them together. You can show they'll tend to be thin; as their orbits evolve, the particles tend to spread out into the same plane. But what keeps them from spreading out indefinitely until they disperse completely? Until recently the well-defined edges of Saturn's rings were very hard to explain.

This problem was solved with the discovery of "shepherd moons" near the edges of the rings; like sheep dogs, they keep the rings in place, in a subtle manner. Take the outer "shepherd" as an example. The rings' gravity pulls back on the satellite, which removes energy from it; so it tends to drop into a lower orbit, at which point it moves faster! At the same time its gravity pulls ahead on the ring particles, pulling them into higher orbits so they slow down—and as the ring particles slow down and the satellite pulls ahead, the gravitational pull between them drops off rapidly. Thus, the satellite's gravity "massages" the edge of the rings, keeping the ring particles' orbits from spreading. (This also means the shepherd moons must themselves be small enough to be affected by the mass of the rings.)

Could an Earthlike planet have rings? Probably tidal perturbations (such as I describe below) would prevent this. An Earthlike planet is so close to its star—and its gravity, by comparison with Saturn's, is so modest—that they wouldn't be stable geologically.

Maybe not, though. Or maybe rings could be formed by an unusual event—a large impact on a satellite, say—and last for a "little while" geologically, but for a long time as the human race reckons it.

Not only did the Voyagers give our first real inkling into what is happening in Saturn's rings, it also showed many unexpected new quirks in that planet's system.

Co-orbiting satellites, for example. The tiny moons Janus and Epimetheus nearly share an orbit; but one never passes the other. They're forever going faster and slower in the orbit, approaching as though to pass

a baton in a relay—only to drop back before getting close enough to touch. As seen from Saturn, they'd get closer, slow down, and then separate again as though they'd "bounced off" each other. Things would look even more bizarre from one of the moons themselves; you'd see the other moon approaching, but you'd slow down and it would speed up as you got closer, until finally it would flee out of sight. Then the whole pattern would repeat later, when the fleeing satellite finally "lapped" its companion—but you'd have to go around to the other side of the satellite to watch the show again.

The interaction is like that between a ring and a shepherd; as the satellite in the slightly lower orbit approaches, moving more quickly because it's nearer the primary, the gravity from the satellite ahead pulls it into a slightly higher orbit where it slows down. Similarly, the satellite ahead, pulled from behind, drops into a lower orbit where it can move more quickly. And this interchange happens over and over.

The co-orbiters are a particular example of a "resonance." This is a concept you find throughout dynamics, not just in the intricacies of gravity. An everyday example is pushing a child on a swing. We all know you have to time the pushes just right for the swing to swing. Or, as a physicist might say, the forcing function needs to be near the "resonant frequency" of the swing. More generally, a resonance in mechanics happens when something gets pushed (or pulled) at about the frequency at which it would oscillate naturally (the "resonant frequency").

Resonances happen in orbits when the orbital periods are multiples of each other. Consider two orbiting satellites, one with a period twice that of the other. Every second orbit, the lower satellite (the one with the shorter period) gets a tug from the outer satellite, always from the same direction.

At first glance such an orbital resonance seems unstable; that extra gravitational pull at exactly the same time on every other orbit (or every third, or so) should perturb it right out of the resonance.

This happens, but a more detailed analysis shows that the perturbations tend to be self-canceling. That is, when the orbits go slightly out of resonance, then perturbations tend to bring them back into resonance, and so on. Thus the orbits oscillate around the resonance configuration. (Don't feel bad; not only have I gotten this wrong, I've explained it wrong in the past.)

And if you have more than three bodies, resonances can get intricate indeed. The Jovian moons Io, Europa, and Ganymede are currently trapped into intricate resonance whose stability remained unexplained for over three centuries, until 1979.

In fact, the Solar System contains quite a number of resonances and near-resonances, and most must be quite stable. Evidently satellites can evolve into such configurations and stay there for a long time, as their orbits change from tidal evolution (which, again, I'll describe below).

This leads into another observation: in a sense, planetary satellite systems are older than the Solar System itself! Not in terms of actual years, of course, but in the sense of dynamic lifetimes. For consider: over the 4.5 billion-year history of the System, Saturn (say) has orbited the Sun about 150 million times in its 30-year orbit. But Saturn's moon Titan has orbited Saturn some 100 billion times! This makes satellite systems especially interesting to celestial mechanics interested in such things as the long-term stability of the Solar System.

Apart from the mathematical chaos of the many-body problem, though, the Solar System changes for two other reasons.

The first reason is that worlds aren't perfect spheres. A perfect sphere acts as though all its mass is concentrated at a point at its center. An imperfect sphere, though, doesn't act like a point mass, and its unsymmetrical gravity field is a lever by which external gravitational pulls can change its orbital parameters.

One such "lever" comes from rotation, which makes real planets bulge at the equator. An important effect caused by this lever is obliquity variations. Obliquity (wonderful word!) is the tilt of a planet's axis, and obvious-

ly it has profound effects on climate—look at Earth's seasons! Gravitational tugs from other bodies change the obliquity over geologic time. On Earth, climate changes from such variations—the “Milankovich variations”—are generally thought to be major causes of the recent ice ages.

Systematic variations in Mars's orbit and obliquity may have caused even more drastic changes in its climate, as Mars's tilt changes over the eons. In fact, just recently two groups of researchers have presented studies indicating that the obliquity of the inner planets—aside from Earth—changes chaotically over geologic time. Long-term Martian climate may be haphazard indeed!

Why don't such drastic changes happen with Earth? The Moon prevents them. In effect, another planet has to perturb the entire Earth-Moon system, which is much more difficult. (The Moon all by itself causes most of the obliquity variations the Earth undergoes, but they're much more modest.)

A large moon has been speculated to be important for an Earthlike planet, but the traditional ideas for its importance (e.g., tides as evolutionary drivers, or the need to strip away excess atmosphere) have been obsolete for some time. Instead, the value of the Moon may be in the obliquity stabilization (and thus climate stabilization) it causes.

Gravitational effects from the equatorial bulge also keep close satellites nearly in the plane of planet's equator. If you suddenly tilted a spinning planet, the orbits of its close-in satellites would gradually also tilt to follow the planet's equator, and soon (geologically speaking) they'd be in the equatorial plane again. This is no doubt why even Uranus, tilted on its side at nearly 90 degrees to its orbit, has its nearby satellites in the plane of its equator.

In fact, *really* close-in satellites are limited by irregularities in the planet itself. Real planets don't have just an equatorial bulge; they have mountains and valleys, denser rock and lighter rock—and all these make a planet's gravity vary slightly from place to place. This is why, for example, a close-in satellite of the Moon would

be unstable; such variations soon would change the orbit enough that it would collide with the ground. In fact, it's been suggested that some of the ancient, huge craters on the Moon were made by short-lived lunar satellites, back when the Earth and the Moon were still forming.

These variations also make mapping the Moon from close orbit less straightforward than it seems, because perturbations (especially from the far side, where you know even less about the mass distribution) soon send your satellite crashing into the ground if you try to orbit too closely. (By the way, on Earth such subtle variations in surface gravity are measured by geophysicists, especially in the Oil Patch, to determine subsurface geologic structure.)

The second “non-chaos” reason for Solar System changes is that worlds aren't points. They have finite sizes. And that leads to tides; a tidal force simply results from the *difference* in gravity across an object. Consider (for example) the Moon orbiting the Earth: the gravitational forces are in exact balance with the centrifugal forces of the orbit only at the centers of the Earth and Moon. The part of the Earth nearest the Moon “feels” an extra gravitational tug, and the part farthest away feels an extra centripetal acceleration. The upshot is that a tidal force raises a bulge that points both toward and away from the body causing the tide.

Because it results from a difference in distance, the tide-raising force drops off much more quickly with distance than does gravity itself. For example, the Moon is only about 250,000 miles away. Since the Earth is about 8,000 miles in diameter, you are 8,000 miles closer to the Moon on one side of the Earth than the other. That's a difference of 8,000/250,000, or about 3%. However, the difference with the Sun, 93,000,000 miles away, is only 8000/93,000,000, or about 0.009%. This is why the lunar tide is so much stronger—the Moon is a *lot* closer.

Because they also distort a planet or moon from a spherical shape, tides also provide a lever for gravity. Furthermore, it's a lever that depends very strongly on how far away the

tid-raising body is. This makes for subtle and far-reaching effects indeed.

For example, tidal effects dominate how the eccentricity of a close-in satellite orbit changes. (Eccentricity measures how elliptical an orbit is. A perfect circle has eccentricity zero.)

For a satellite revolving in the same direction its primary rotates (a “prograde” satellite), tidal perturbations would increase the eccentricity—if nothing else happened. In effect, the orbit's always getting a push at its closest point in the direction that tends to add energy to the orbit. (Because the tidal force drops off so quickly, most of the effects occur when the satellite's closest.)

In fact, though, tides nearly always cause orbits to become more circular (that is, less eccentric). This is due to energy loss: as the satellite is flexed and wobbled while the tides act on it, energy is dissipated as heat—and that energy comes from the satellite's orbit.

(If the satellite has a backwards or “retrograde” orbit, tidal effects always circularize the orbit. Neptune's large moon Triton is a spectacular example; it has a close-in, retrograde orbit that's indistinguishable from a perfect circle.)

Gravitational pulls on the tidal bulge also can move “spin” (angular momentum, technically) from the rotation of worlds around their axes to their revolution in their orbits. This changes orbit sizes over time, and also slows down (or speeds up) the rotation of the planet itself.

How does this happen? The planet's rotation tends to carry the tidal bulge forward so that it's no longer lined up with the satellite. A prograde moon pulls back on the bulge with its gravity and thus slows the planet down. (Similarly, the bulge pulls forward on the moon, adding energy to its orbit and thus causing it to move farther from the primary.)

This is called tidal “braking”; it's why the Moon now keeps the same face toward Earth. The Moon's rotation was braked long ago. And the Moon, of course, is returning the compliment: it's braking the Earth's rotation. (In fact, the braking is unusually strong right now because the tides are nearly in resonance with

the natural frequency at which the Earth's ocean "sloshes.") If things go to completion, the Moon's retreat will halt when the Earth always keeps one face toward the Moon. Earth and Moon will then face each other permanently, slowly rotating like a couple in a country-western dance. (Pluto and its satellite Charon are in this position right now.)

The reverse happens with a retrograde moon; it gets dragged in closer, eventually to destruction. This will be Triton's fate in a few hundred million years or so.

Things get even dicier with a third tide-raising body in the system. Tides from the third body *keep* changing the orbit. This is why satellites don't have satellites—over the lifetime of the Solar System, they just wouldn't be stable. It's also why Mercury and Venus don't have satellites; solar tides would have caused their orbits to migrate into their parent planet by now. In fact, one scientist has recently suggested that many of the (geologically) recent craters on Venus result from the decay of its satellites!

Saturn's satellite Hyperion is an-

other case: it can't reach a tidal lock at all. Perturbations from other satellites keep Hyperion's orbital eccentricity non-zero, and the satellite is also not at all spherical. The result is that it tumbles chaotically in its orbit, and will do so for the geologically foreseeable future.

Tidal locking has also traditionally been thought to make Earthlike planets impossible around red dwarf stars. Such stars, the most common in the Universe, are vastly dimmer than our Sun—a thousandth or so the luminosity. But they're not much less massive; maybe 8% or so at the smallest. So, to get the same amount of heat and light, an Earthlike planet needs to be much deeper in the gravity well—so deep that its rotation would soon be braked to a halt by the stellar tide.

However, "locks" other than 1:1 are possible for noncircular orbits. The classic Solar System example is Mercury's orbit around the Sun. Before about 1965, Mercury was thought to be in a 1:1 lock with the Sun, just as the Moon keeps one face to the Earth. (And numberless classic SF stories were written with this setting.)

But in fact Mercury's orbit is not a 1:1 lock; it's 3:2. It rotates 3 times for every two orbits, and so it does *not* keep one face to the Sun. Robert L. Forward, in his recent novel *Time-master*, suggested this is a way to have an Earthlike planet close to a red dwarf star—a quirk that could vastly increase the number of Earthlike planets. (They'll last far longer, too. Red dwarf stars are burning their nuclear fuel at an exceedingly miserly rate: a star with a tenth the mass but a thousandth the luminosity of the Sun should last for almost a trillion years. This is important if you're taking the long view!)

Newton came up with the law of gravitation in the late 1600s, and we are still far from working out all its ramifications. It's remarkable that a seemingly "simple" law has such depths of diversity—but then, as I've said before, the diversity of our Universe vastly exceeds our imaginations. But that's all the more reason to use it as a source of artistic inspiration. ♦

About the Authors

Our fiction roster for this issue starts and ends with first-contact stories—radically different, and each one proof that lots of variations on this theme remain to be explored. L. A. Taylor used the interstellar realm of the 22nd century as the setting for "Scenes From a Past and Future Now," her first solo appearance in these pages. She collaborated with Gene DeWeese on "Death Link," which was seen in our September 1991 issue, and has had several stories in *Analog* in the meantime.

Michael D. Winkle is the first of four writers making their debuts with us in this issue. "Old as You Feel" is his fifth published piece, and a good story to treat yourself to the next time you're thinking that you don't have much to look forward to.

Eric T. Baker has made two other sales, but "Uncertainty and the Dread Word Love" is his first work of fiction

to see publication. Eric reports that the story has gotten a lot better since he composed the first draft two years ago, "but the relationship between Jane and Andrew never got any easier to write about."

"Jimi Plays Dead" is the latest experiment in zaniness from **Bruce Bethke**, and the eighth time he's been seen here. His debut story, "Cyberpunk," came out almost exactly ten years ago (November 1983), and his most recent previous appearance was "The Single-Bullet Theory" in April 1993.

Pete D. Manison joins our ranks with "In the Valley of Life," the seventh story he has published since getting his start in *Writers of the Future Volume 6* three years ago. He has more material forthcoming, including another *WotF* story.

"Unemployment, Then and Now" is a milestone for **W. Gregory Stewart**—

his first published piece of prose fiction. Readers of this magazine know him as the creator of a couple of long stories-in-verse, including "the button, and what you know" (June 1991), which was a Rhysling Award winner.

Space is getting tight, so we'll let the brilliant essay by **Michael Swanwick** that begins on page 51 do all the talking on behalf of **R. A. Lafferty**, whose own brand of brilliance is showcased in "Cliffs That Laughed"—a marvelous story, with or without flute.

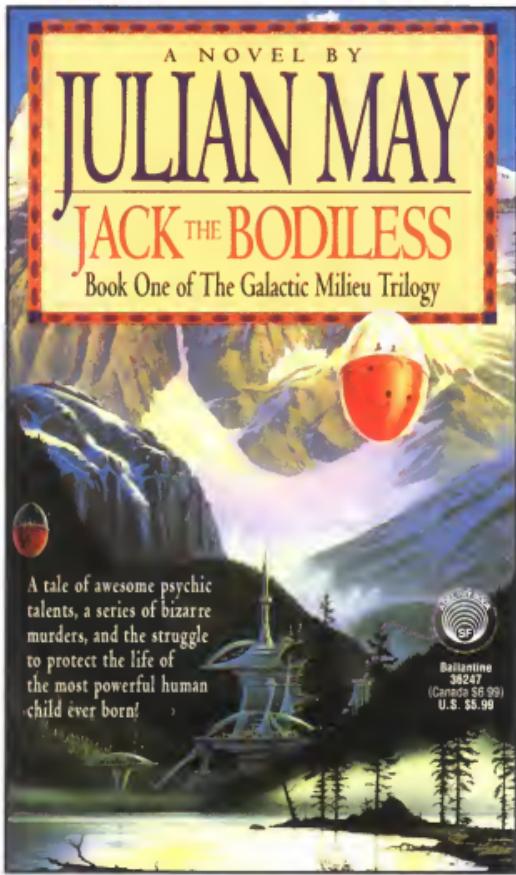
For his examination of the first-contact phenomenon, **Jack McDevitt** used a here-and-now setting: the fictional town of Fort Moxic, North Dakota, which has showed up in his short stories before. "Ships in the Night" is Jack's first appearance here after 12 years as a professional writer, which means that Jack is no longer a "ship in the night" as far as this magazine is concerned. ♦

Looking Forward:

Jack the Bodiless

by Julian May

Coming in November 1993 from Del Rey Books



Introduction by Bill Fawcett

In the year 2051, a united Earth stands ready to become a member of the Galactic Milieu. Psychic operants are the key to this new future, but something has arrived on Earth that threatens to destroy them all. As the alien threat becomes apparent, a son is born to the planet's most prominent family. The male child could become the most capable metapsychic ever . . . if he lives long enough.

The following excerpt is from the beginning of this sweeping and deeply personal novel.

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF ROGATIEN REMILLARD

I still have the nightmare sometimes. I had it on the night that I was unceremoniously translated from the planet Denali to Earth at the truncated end of my skiing holiday and commanded to resume writing these Memoirs.

As always, the dream played itself out in a weird, accelerating time-lapse mode. There is nothing terrifying about the scene at first. A beautiful mother holds an infant, completely wrapped in a blanket, and she looks up from the baby as a fourteen-year-old boy approaches. This older child of hers has a strangely ominous aura about him. He has come hurriedly home from his classes at Dartmouth College on a blustery day, and he wears black turbocycle leathers and carries a much-modified visor helmet tucked under his arm. His eyes are gray

and his mind opaque, and his smile is tentative and quirkily one-sided as he accepts his mother's invitation to open the blanket and see his new little brother for the first time . . . in the flesh.

The black-gloved hands are trembling slightly with an emotion that the older boy despises and tries vainly to check. And then the baby lies revealed, unclothed, perfect. And the minds of Marc and Teresa mingle in joy:

Mama be's all right!

YesyesYES!!

Papa was wrong the genetic assay was wrong—

Yes dear wrong wrong wrong little Jack's body is normal and his mind *bis mind* . . . !

Mind?

Oh Marc dear his mind just speak to him it's wonderful don't be afraid to wake him . . .

The baby's delicate eyelids open.

And in my dream, there are no eyes.

I hear laughter, and I recognize the voice of Victor. But it can't be Victor because he died twelve years before Jack was born; and for nearly twenty-seven years before that he was helpless, disembodied as Jack would be but unlike Jack deprived of all metafunction, all physical and mental contact with the world outside himself. In my dream, the devilish laughter fades in a smell of pine and a cataract of pain. Tears pour down Marc's face for the first time in his austere young life. The eyeless infant smiles at us—

And suddenly the *real* nightmare takes charge.

No eyes. Only a void, a starless darkness that is somehow alive with fearsome knowledge. My dream races on, and Teresa and young Marc are gone. There is only a pathetic little child shackled to complex life-supportive equipment, and while I watch in horror, his human form begins to disintegrate.

I try to tear my gaze away from the awful sight, but I cannot. Faster and faster, the self-destructive process programmed by his own body proceeds.

The child's despairing mother blames her own hubris for his suffering. His father, Paul, countering his own pain with clinical detachment, finds the disincarnation bleakly fascinating. Marc sees his first glimpse of Mental Man. Dennis Remillard and Colette Roy and the other scientists of the Human Polity call the child a prochronistic mutant, an anomaly born out of proper time, too early in the scheme of biological evolution, a throw-forward in the pattern of orderly human development. Four of the exotic races of the Galactic Milieu, pitying, call the little boy pathetic and doomed. The enigmatic Lylmik refuse to discuss his case at all, except for flatly prohibiting his euthanasia.

In the dream, my mind is shrieking: No no Ti-Jean no God no how can you let his body die while his brain lives the brain the wonderful potent superbrain God why why—

Then I see the brain naked.

I plead: Let it die too let the poor thing die stop the machines the genetic engineering attempts the futile meddling let him go in peace let him go!

A monster that does not know its self sees the brain as the Great Enemy, and in a cataract of flame the machines are stopped.

I hear the laughter of the dead fiend again as Victor savors the hideous irony of the situation. For the brain that is Jack the Bodiless does *not* die, but lives. Impossibly, it lives, impervious, sustaining itself in some arcane psycho-redactive fashion, nourished by the atmosphere and by photons, enduring and adapting and learning and growing in wisdom and grace and dieu de dieu I am so afraid of it paralyzed with dread even as it tries to reassure me and in my dream I call its name:

Ti-Jean! Jack!

This horrifying mutant, this *tbing*, is still my dear little great-grandnephew Jon Remillard, a brilliant and vibrant little human person only three years old, trapped in 1.7 kilograms of unsupported humanoid encephalic protoplasm.

None of Jack's eventual triumph penetrates my nightmare. I know only my own fear and revulsion and a demonic whisper: *Who will be the next to disincarnate? Perhaps you, Rogi? . . .*

Then Marc is at my side again, much older. This time his dark armor is the glistening wet body-monitoring coverall of a cerebroenergetic enhancer, the perilous mind-boosting device outlawed by the Galactic Milieu. Marc studies the bodiless thing that is his mutant brother with open admiration. And a paradoxical envy.

I see a warning reflected from eyeless depths, and Marc sees it, too.

Jack's mind tells us: No. Human is better. For you, Marc. For all of you.

Marc smiles and shakes his head, denying. Mental Man is the inevitable, the culmination of all rational being—and there is no need to wait upon evolution's laggard pace for His coming. He can be summoned—

Suddenly I see three persons suspended in interstellar space: a faceless woman clad in a suit of diamonds, a blazing plasma that enfolds the first Mental Man, and a black armored shape leading an interstellar armada in opposition to the other two. The Metapsychic Rebellion of humanity against the Galactic Milieu has begun.

At my dream's climax, a blue-and-white planet explodes, haloed by a mass death-shout. And in that terrible moment the Galactic Milieu, the benevolent confederation that saved the human race from its own folly and gave us the stars as a playground, itself begins to die . . .

The dream always ends at this point, before the final revolution, and I return to consciousness freezing and paralyzed, with a half-strangled scream caught in my throat.

Peace! T'en fais pas, Rogi! Calm yourself and relax. It all happened long ago, and now at last in the writing of this personal chronicle you have a way of exorcising the nightmare once and for all.

Perhaps you already know me from the introductory volume of these Memoirs. If you do not, let me introduce myself briefly. My name is Rogatien Remillard, and I am sometimes called Roger but more often simply Uncle

Rogi (pronounced, appropriately enough, as "rogue he") by those who find my Christian name impossibly ethnic. It is of French origin, and the Remillards are a sizable family who originally were colonists in Québec and later migrated to the northeastern United States, where there was a large but unobtrusive Franco-American population.

I have for most of my life been a bookseller in the college town of Hanover, New Hampshire. I have a small antiquarian bookshop, The Eloquent Page, where rare old twentieth-century fantasy and science fiction books printed on carefully conserved paper are offered to connoisseurs at atrocious prices. Although I belong to a family of acknowledged mental giants, my own intellectual and metapsychic functions are meager. This has not prevented me from being caught up in the chequered careers of my more illustrious relatives. On the contrary, I have played at times a rather significant role in the family's machinations—something that Milieu historians have seen fit to ignore—and I have witnessed from my worm's-eye view the rise and fall of many a Galactic worthy and villain, including two saints and one notorious individual whose misdeeds were so appalling that he was known as the Angel of the Abyss.

I have never married, but I have loved unwisely several times. I have faced imminent death on quite a few occasions and survived through improbable happenstance. I have killed three persons in cold blood, even though I am the most easygoing and peaceable of men, and one of them was a person I loved deeply.

My fraternal twin brother, Donatien, and I were born in the year 1945, in the New England mill town of Berlin, New Hampshire. Our young father had already been killed during World War II, and our mother died giving birth to us, so we orphans were raised by our kindly aunt and uncle, who had six children of their own.

But no members of the Remillard clan except my brother and I had the "immortality" genes, whose exis-

tence was not confirmed until after the Intervention, nor did they possess the genes for higher mindpowers. (It was many years before my twin brother and I discovered that we were not unique in our metapsychic operancy.) How we two responded to our more frightening metafunctions is a story that I have already related at some length. In brief, I learned to live with such powers as telepathy, psychokinesis, and metacoercion, while Don was ultimately destroyed by them, tragically killed with he was only forty-four.

I was rendered sterile by a childhood illness. Don had ten offspring, and all of them inherited the genes for higher metafunction and self-rejuvenation; but only the two oldest children were able to utilize their extraordinary mindpowers. Circumstances made Don's oldest child, Denis, become a foster son to me; and it was he who founded with his operant wife Lucille Cartier the so-called Remillard Dynasty, which eventually included many of the most powerful minds the human race has ever known. Don's second son, Victor, was not as intellectually brilliant as his older brother, but his metapsychic powers were probably even more formidable, and he used them ruthlessly for his own self-aggrandizement until he was finally struck down, immediately prior to the Great Intervention, either by me or by the mysterious being I had learned to call the Family Ghost.

From time to time, especially when I am drunk and morose and seized with that melancholy feeling of inescapable doom that francophones call malheur, I have been tempted to believe that the Family Ghost is nothing more than a construct of my own imagination. But if that is true, then by default I am responsible for not only the Great Intervention but for the Metapsychic Rebellion as well, and ultimately for the even more momentous events that came afterward, bringing the long story full cycle.

But that would be too farfetched a practical joke, even for le bon dieu, who is so full of them. ♦

Looking Forward:

The Sharp End

by David Drake

Coming in November 1993 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

The latest book in the popular *Hammer's Slammers* series is just as full of strong characters and fast action as its predecessors. What makes this book distinctive is its introduction of a new kind of Hammer's Slammer—a survey team, dropped into the middle of a planet-wide gang war, that has the authority and the inclination to do more than just survey.

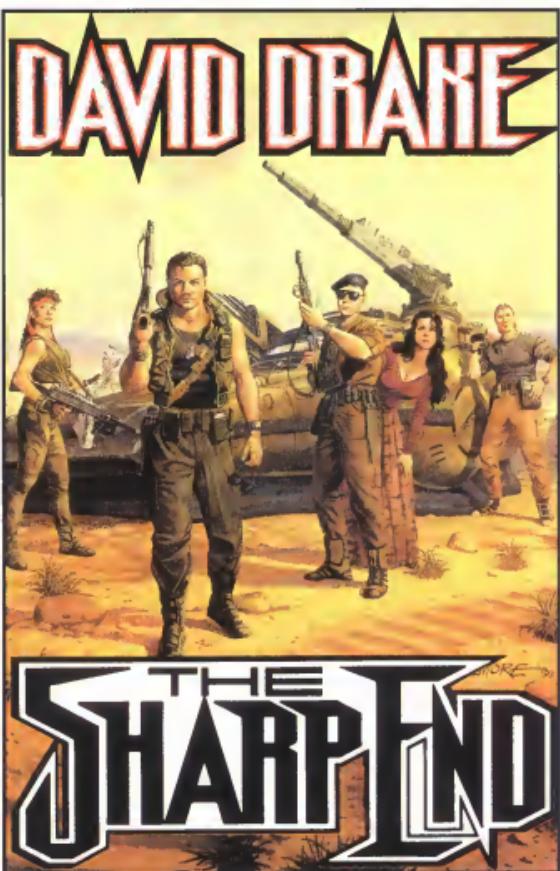
In this excerpt from early in the novel, we are introduced to a new and very deadly recruit by the name of Johann Vierziger.

Though Vierziger, the trooper driving Sergeant Malaveda's air-cushion jeep, was a newbie to the Frisian Defense Forces, he obviously had a lot of time in other armies on his clock. Malaveda guessed he was on the wrong side of thirty standard, but it was hard to be sure. Vierziger had the sort of baby-faced cuteness that some men keep from early teens to sixty.

It was one more reason for Malaveda, who shaved his scalp to hide the fact his hair was receding at age 26, to dislike Vierziger.

"Pull up here," Malaveda ordered as they eased toward the mouth of the alley by which they'd approached the rear of the target building. "And don't get out where the street light'll show us up."

The newbie obeyed with the same delicate skill he'd shown while navigating the alley in the dark. In light-amplification mode, the visors of Frisian commo helmets increased visibility to daytime norms, but they robbed terrain of the shadings which the human brain processed into relative distances. Vierziger was a good driver,



Cover art by Larry Elmore

Malaveda had to admit—

To himself. There was no way he was going to praise the little turd out loud.

Vierziger switched off the fans. The hollow echo that filled the alley even on whisper mode drained away.

"Who the hell told you to shut down?" Malaveda snarled.

The newbie turned and looked at him. Vierziger's expression was blank but not tranquil. Malaveda felt ice at the base of his neck.

"Nobody did, Sergeant," Vierziger said. His voice was low-pitched, melodious, and just enough off-key to reinforce the chill Malaveda felt in his glance. "Would you like me to light the fans again?"

Malaveda scowled. "That's not what I said. Just remember, you may *tthink* you know something, but you're serving with the best, now!"

Vierziger faced the alley mouth again. He drew his 2-cm shoulder weapon from the butt clamp that held it vertical beside his seat and checked the magazine. "I'll keep that in mind," he said.

Malaveda scowled, but didn't restart the discussion for the time being.

Lawler was a highly developed world with a population of nearly forty million. Even so there should have been enough room and resources for everybody.

The ostensible cause of—not-quite-war, but soon—was that the central provinces of the occupied continent wanted to retain links with Earth, while the coastal provinces wanted a Lawler that was independent and, coincidentally, ruled by coastal-province oligarchies.

The Junta of Central Province Governors had faced a planet-wide vote which would have been dominated by their opponents' political machines. They forestalled it by raising their own army—and hiring two armored brigades from the Frisian Defense Forces.

The Junta couldn't afford to pay the mercenaries forever just to stand around and look tough. Malaveda figured there'd be a riot pretty soon in one of the border cities. The Planetary Front—the thugs from the coasts—would kill people for putting the riot down, or anyway the Junta would say they had.

And the Junta would respond, with FDF panzers the cutting edge of the blow.

For the time being, Malaveda and the rest of 3d Squad, 1st Platoon, A Company, 105th Military Police Detachment (Lawler), had a problem which didn't in the least involve local politics. A trooper named Soisson had been guarding a warehouse in Belair, the Junta's capital. Soisson shot the fellow on duty with him, then ran off with a truckload of powergun ammunition.

The ammo was probably an afterthought—the most valuable thing the bastard could grab after he'd nuttered. It had to be recovered, though, and Soisson had to be brought back dead or alive. The tradition of the White Mice, the field police of Hammer's Slammers, was that dead was preferable.

Soisson was supposed to be hiding in a front apartment of the three-story building across the street. Malaveda waited in a backstop position thirty meters from the

rear door. Lieutenant Hartlepool would take the main part of the squad in by the front and catch Soisson in bed—if everything went as planned. The lieutenant had stationed Malaveda there just in case.

Malaveda waited with a newbie who obviously thought he was hot stuff, even though he didn't actually say so. Malaveda lifted his sub-machine gun to his shoulder, aimed it at the apartment building's back door, and clocked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

He lowered the weapon and looked again at his driver. "I guess you think you've seen action, don't you?" he said.

Vierziger turned, raised an eyebrow, and turned back. "I've seen action, yes," he said softly.

"Well let me tell you how it is, buddy," Malaveda said. "You haven't seen anything till you've seen it with the FDF. Lieutenant Hartlepool, the Old Man? He was in the White Mice when Major Steuben commanded them. He was a friend of Major Steuben's."

Vierziger looked at him. "Joachim Steuben didn't have any friends," he said. His tone was as bleak as the space between stars.

Malaveda waited for the newbie to take his glacial eyes away before saying, "You know a lot—for a guy who enlisted three months ago!"

"I know too much," Vierziger said, almost too quietly to be heard. "I know way too much. Now, let's just watch and wait, like we're supposed to. All right, Sergeant?"

As if a fucking newbie could tell a sergeant what to do! But Malaveda didn't feel like saying anything more. He'd had a creepy feeling about Vierziger from when the bastard was assigned to the squad. Vierziger made everybody's skin crawl. Being alone with him in a jeep was like—

There was a sound in the alley behind them. Malaveda, keyed up, started to swing his sub-machine gun toward the noise. Vierziger—

Malaveda didn't see the newbie move. There was the sound, and Vierziger was—
standing in the jeep—

facing backward—
his 2-cm weapon in his left hand, held at the balance, out a hand's-breadth from his hip—

where it counter-weighted the pistol pointing in his right hand, a gleam of polished metals, the iridium barrel and gold and purple scrollwork on the receiver.

Malaveda hadn't seen the fucker move!

Vierziger slipped the pistol back into a cut-away holster that rode high on his right hip. It wasn't an issue rig, and it looked like it ought to be uncomfortable for driving; though he'd driven all right too.

He sat down again and smiled faintly at Malaveda. "Just a rat," he said. "Jumping onto the manhole cover back there. Where you have humans, you have rats."

Malaveda nodded in the direction of the pistol, now out of sight again. "Where the hell did you learn to do that?" he asked.

Vierziger shrugged. "Practice," he said. His face was unlined. He looked like a choirboy in this soft illumination, street lights shimmering from the damp brick walls

of the alley. "And I had a—talent for it, I suppose you'd say."

"Bloody hell," Malaveda said.

A slow-moving car went by, the first traffic since the MP jeep took its pre-dawn station in the alley. The vehicle's windows were polarized opaque. They reflected the knife-edged whiteness of the hood-center headlight.

Malaveda didn't want to speak, but he heard himself say, "Could you teach somebody to do that? To—draw that way?"

"It's just practice, Sergeant," Vierziger said.

He looked at his companion again. Malaveda couldn't have explained what was different about the newbie's expression, but this time it didn't make him shiver to see it.

"It isn't hard to shoot people, you know," Vierziger said. "The hard part is knowing which ones. They don't always come with labels."

He smiled. Malaveda wasn't sure if the statement was meant for a joke. He smiled back.

The artificial intelligence in Malaveda's commo helmet projected a sudden emptiness through the earphones. The non-sound was the absence of the static which would otherwise have crackled when somebody opened the push but didn't speak.

"We're going in," a radioed voice whispered; Lieutenant Hartlepool or the squad leader, Sergeant-Commander Brankins. You couldn't tell in a brief spread-band transmission.

Malaveda threw the sub-machine gun to his shoulder again. Vierziger flicked him a side-glance and smiled faintly, but he didn't otherwise move.

Malaveda hadn't heard how they'd located Soisson. Chances were the tech boys had swept the low-rent district till they picked up the signature of the electronics in the powergun Soisson ran with. The deserter might have sold the weapon or traded it for something more concealable, but even so it was a link on the chain that would lead back to him.

Whoever had the sub-machine gun would be bent outta shape when a squad of armed men rousted him at this hour. Watching the back door wasn't necessarily going to be a tea party, but Malaveda was just as glad not to be in the snatch team.

All hell broke loose.

The initial gunfire was from the front of the apartment building. Malaveda couldn't see who was shooting, but the hiss-crack! of powerguns and reflected cyan light quivered over and around the structure.

It didn't sound like a raid, it sounded like war.

The back door opened halfway. A man peered through the crack.

Malaveda aimed his sub-machine gun. The holographic sight picture stuttered around the man. "Come out with your hands up!" he shouted.

The man started to duck back inside. Vierziger blew his head off in a flash of saturated blue.

The quality of light reflected from a third-floor window above the doorway changed. Malaveda noted the event subliminally, but his brain hadn't processed it into *somebody just std opaque blinds open behind the polarized*

pane in order to see me/shoot me when Vierziger fired again. The window shattered. The 2-cm round smacked a belt of powergun ammo slung around the man aiming a sub-machine gun. Hundreds of charged disks gang-fired, touched off by the 2-cm bolt. The blast must have cleared the room.

Soisson had made contact either with fifth columnists set up by the Front, or with a criminal gang that might as well be a government for the weapons in its arsenal. Either way, the snatch squad had walked right into a hornet's nest.

Malaveda ripped out half his magazine with no better target than the whole rear of the building. He hadn't expected things to blow up this way. It had spooked him.

Vierziger fired at another of the top range of windows. He must have seen something or he had the devil's own luck, because there was a man behind the disintegrated pane. The fellow had been pointing a shoulder weapon.

He'd been wearing body armor too, but that didn't help him against the energy a 2-cm bolt packed. The body hurtled backward, propelled by the shock of its colloid structure suddenly vaporizing. The victim's sleeves were burning.

The sub-machine gun recoiled against Malaveda's shoulder. That and the quivering gaps across his field of view, his visor blacking out the cyan dazzle to save his eyesight, combined to focus him on the job at hand. *It's not like this is my first firefright.*

When Malaveda was sure his partner had reloaded, he emptied the sub-machine gun into two windows chosen at random on the top floor. He thumbed the release and reached down to his belt pouch for a fresh magazine.

Sirens and screams clawed what had been the night's stillness, punctuated with the slapping discharges of powerguns. A blast too loud for a grenade shook the opposite side of the apartment. Windows facing the alley shattered. Shards of the panes snowed onto the sidewalk.

Vierziger—

Malaveda's mind flashed with a montage of his partner in various stages of what had happened next.

First Vierziger's left hand lifted his 2-cm weapon up toward his shoulder, the girlishly perfect fingers of his right hand curving to the grip. Then Vierziger faced the back of the alley, the shoulder weapon out to his side than the pistol, again the pistol, pointing.

Three shots, strobe-light quick, winking on the face of the man lifting the manhole cover from beneath. Cratering the flesh, rupturing the skull itself with the pressure of gasified nerve tissue. The eyes blanking, the sub-machine gun dropping back into the utility passage converted to an underground escape route; the cover clanking down, catching the dead man's fingers for a moment before gravity tugged them loose.

Vierziger holstered the pistol. He bent, switched on the jeep's drive fans, and hopped out beside the vehicle. "Come on!" he ordered. "Watch our back."

"What?" Malaveda said. He jumped clear of the jeep. He felt as though he was partnered with a ticking bomb. He didn't understand what was happening, but he was afraid not to obey the newbie absolutely. ♦

Tomorrow's Books

November 1993 Releases

Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Douglas Adams: *Mostly Harmless* Ballantine SF, 1st tr pb, 288 pp, \$12.00. The fifth volume in the celebrated *Hitchhiker's* "trilogy."

John Barnes: *A Million Open Doors* Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 320 pp, \$4.99. The vast distances between colonized worlds left them isolated, to develop in thousands of different directions. Then the invention of instantaneous travel between worlds brings them into contact—and conflict.

Gael Baudino: *Shroud of Shadow* Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. Nat is the last of the Elves, the keepers of enchantments, and there is no place for her or her magic in the age of the Inquisition.

Peter S. Beagle: *The Innkeeper's Song* Roc Fantasy, hc, 368 pp, \$20.00. A young man's quest for the ghost of his dead lover entwines his life with three magical women and their own dangerous quest.

Greg Bear: *Hardfought* Tor SF, pb reiss, 192 pp, \$2.95. For Double #2, The Nebula Award winning novella.

Greg Bear: *Moving Mars* Tor SF, hc, 496 pp, \$23.95. On Mars, the Martian born colonists begin to resent the way Earth keeps all the best of everything . . . and to dream and plan for independence.

Terry Bisson: *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories* Tor SF, hc, 256 pp, \$19.95. A collection of short stories by Hugo and Nebula Award winner Terry Bisson.

Cynthia Blair: *Dark Moon Legacy: The Seduction* Harper YA Horror, pb orig, \$3.99. In this second book in the *Dark Moon Legacy*, Garth makes his beloved Miranda into a werewolf but, unlike him, she seems to revel in the bloodlust of her newfound power.

Robert Bloch, editor: *Monsters in Our Midst* Tor Horror, hc, 304 pp, \$20.95. An anthology of 17 stories that terrify without resorting to supernatural menaces.

Richard Lee Byers: *The Nightmare Club #6: Party Till You Drop Z-Face* YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. There's a wild party planned in Cooper Hollow, but nobody planned on the uninvited guests—ancient flesh-eaters out of Native American legend.

Diane Carey: *Star Trek: Best Destiny* Pocket SF, 1st time in pb, 416 pp, \$5.99. As Kirk prepares to retire from his career in Starfleet, he is drawn back to a planet he visited in his youth, which changed his life forever.

Hal Clement: *Fossil: Isaac's Universe* DAW SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Six vastly different starfaring races, including humans, combine forces to explore an alien world which may contain relics of the long-lost Seventh Race.

Adrian Cole: *Blood Red Angel* Avanova Fantasy, pb orig, 384 pp, \$4.99. On a world of perpetual darkness, the Provider is lord while the Angel Guards harvest the fury of the elements . . . and the blood and flesh of humans.

Storm Constantine: *Wraeththu* Orb SF, 1st tr pb, 752 pp, \$15.95. An omnibus

pb reiss: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published



edition of the Wraeththu trilogy: *The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit*, *The Bewitchments of Love and Hate*, and *The Fulfilments of Fate and Desire*.

L. Sprague de Camp: *Rivers of Time* Baen SF, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. The big game hunting business was in a real slump, until the invention of a time machine allowed hunters to go after really big game—dinosaurs.

L. Sprague de Camp & Lin Carter: *Conan #6 The Buccaneer* Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, 192 pp, \$4.50. To find a princess, and a king's treasure, Conan must confront the evil sorcerer Thoth-Ammon.

Charles de Lint: *Into the Green* Tor Fantasy, hc, 256 pp, \$19.95. A quest fantasy about a young woman's journey through the imaginary Kingdom of the Green Isles.

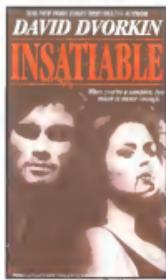
Gordon R. Dickson: *The Dragon at War* Ace Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 384 pp, \$4.99. In this fourth adventure of Sir James, the Dragon Knight, sea serpents challenge the Dragon Knight and he must fight for his country and his life.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: *The Lost World* Tor Fiction, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. The classic adventure novel about dinosaurs living in the 20th century in the jungles of South America.

David Drake: *The Sharp End* Baen SF, hc, 384 pp, \$20.00. Two brutal syndicates struggled for domination on Cantilucca, where guns were the only law. And the survey team sent to sell mercenaries to the highest bidder found they could fight anything but their own consciences.

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as first time in pb).

tr pb: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



David Drake: Author tie-in reissues from Baen SF:

Hammer's Slammers 320 pp, \$4.95.
Hammer's Slammers: At Any Price 288 pp, \$4.95.

Hammer's Slammers: Rolling Hot 288 pp, \$4.50.

Hammer's Slammers: Counting the Cost 288 pp, \$4.95.

Hammer's Slammers: The Warrior 288 pp, \$4.95.

David Dvorkin: *Insatiable* Pinnacle Horror, ph orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. When a man is turned into a vampire, he finds himself hunted by his victims, who crave the ecstasy of his kiss.

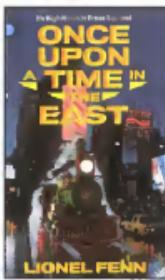
P. N. Elrod: *Red Death* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. First book in a new vampire series by the author of *The Vampire Files*. A young American patriot becomes a vampire on the eve of the Revolutionary War.

Phil Farrand: *The Nipper's Guide for Next Generation Trekkers* Dell Non-fiction, tr pb orig, 398 pp, \$12.95. An unauthorized collection of bloopers and inconsistencies from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Lionel Fenn: *Once Upon a Time in the East* Ace SF, ph orig, 224 pp, \$4.50. The first book in a new time-travel adventure series. A gunslinger from the old west accidentally discovers a time vortex and arrives in Asia in the 1990s.

John M. Ford: *Growing Up Weightless* Spectra SF, tr pb orig, 288 pp, \$11.95. A coming-of-age story about a "lost generation" of young people born and raised in low gravity domed cities on the Moon.

Ester M. Friesner: *Yesterday We Saw Mermaids* Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 160 pp, \$5.99. A blend of history and myth, as Christopher Columbus's ships encounter another vessel, propelled by magic, searching for the mythical sorcerous kingdom of Prester John.



Jo Gibson: *Scream #4: The Dead Girl* Z-Wave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. People keep mistaking Julie for her cousin Vicki. But Vicki is dead and, late at night, she's reaching out to Julie from beyond the grave.

Geary Gravel: *Batman the Animated Series: Shadows of the Past* Bantam, pb orig, 192 pp, \$4.99. The first novelization of *Batman: The Animated Series*, based on Fox Television's new cartoon series.

Martin Harry Greenberg, editor: *The Further Adventures of Superman Spectra*, pb orig, 384 pp, \$5.99. An anthology of all new short stories about Superman. Stories by Diane Duane, Garfield Reeves-Stevens, Mike Resnick and others.

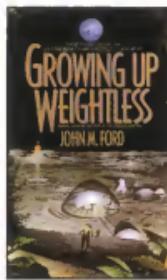
Joe Haldeman: *Dealing in Futures* Roc SF, ph reiss, 352 pp, \$4.99. Eleven of Haldeman's best short stories.

Harry Harrison: *Planet of No Return* Tor SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$3.99. In this illustrated sequel to *Planet of the Damned*, Brion Brando must battle mindless killer robots before he can conquer and save a world of savages.

Edited by David Hartwell: *Christmas Forever* Tor SF, hc, 672 pp, \$29.95. An anthology of stories exploring the miracles of Christmas in new dimensions of space and time. Stories by Gene Wolfe, Alan Dean Foster, Rudy Rucker, Charles de Lint, Patricia A. McKillip, and others.

Edited by David G. Hartwell: *Christmas Stars* Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 320 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of classic Christmas science fiction stories to bring joy to the universe.

Tanya Huff: *Blood Pact* DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 336 pp, \$4.99. The conclusion of a four-book series about a vampire teamed with a Canadian private eye. While making funeral arrangements, Vicki discovers there was nothing natural about her mother's death—and someone plans to keep her mother working . . . dead or alive.



Tanya Huff: Series tie-in reissues from DAW Fantasy:

Blood Price \$3.99,
Blood Trail \$4.50,
Blood Lines \$4.99.

Noel Hynd: *Ghosts* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 512 pp, \$4.99. A supernatural thriller set on Nantucket Island, where the idyllic getaway is about to become a place of terror and evil.

Dean Ing: *Butcher Bird* Tor, hc, 336 pp, \$21.95. A high-tech thriller about a tiny, high-powered laser generator designed as an assassination tool.

Robert Jordan: *The Fires of Heaven* Tor Fantasy, hc, 704 pp, \$24.95. Book 5 of the *Wheel of Time* series. The presence of The Dragon Reborn has ignited the fires of Heaven and a new Breaking of the World may have begun.

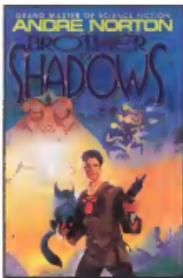
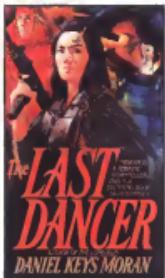
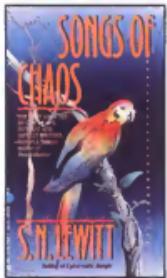
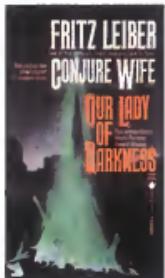
Ronald Kelly: *The Possession* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 384 pp, \$4.50. Weird things are happening at a burned-out Tennessee plantation that is being restored—and a century-old nightmare is heading for a violent conclusion.

Andrew Klavan: *The Animal Hour* Pocket Star Books, Suspense/Horror, 1st time in pb, 368 pp, \$5.50. On Halloween morning a woman finds that no one recognizes her, and she is cast out to face a Halloween night that may lead to madness or death.

Richard A. Knaak: *King of the Grey* Questar Fantasy, ph orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. The Grey are shadowy creatures, harmless as long as they remain trapped in their twilight world of shadows. But then they steal a King—a human whose soul will anchor them in the real world—and the unwilling King must learn to rule his captors, or be destroyed.

Christopher Kuksik: *Earthdawn: The Longing Ring* Roc/FASA Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. The age of magic known as Earthdawn drew Horrors from other





planes that devastated the world for 400 years. Now humans, elves, and other strange folk have allied to overthrow the Horrors, and reclaim and rediscover their world.

Mercedes Lackey & Mark Shepherd: *The Bard's Tale: Prison of Souls* Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 568 pp, \$5.99. In this third novel set in the world created for the role-playing computer game *The Bard's Tale*, the king's son, apprenticed to the Dark Elf Nastrach, is sent on a diplomatic mission to a realm where Bardic magic is outlawed . . . and only magic can prevent war.

Series tie-in reissues from Baen:

Mercedes Lackey & Ru Emerson: *The Bard's Tale: Fortress of Frost and Fire* 448 pp, \$5.99.

Mercedes Lackey & Josephina Sherman: *The Bard's Tale: Castle of Deception* 320 pp, \$5.99.

Mercedes Lackey & Mark Shepherd: *Wheels of Fire* Baen Fantasy, pb reiss., 400 pp, \$4.99. Author tie-in reissue of the first novel set in the world of the SER-RATED Edge, where good elves love hot cars and rescue abused children.

Edward Lee: *The Chosen Zebra* Horror, pb orig, 384 pp, \$4.50. A restaurant manager starts her dream job at The Inn with high hopes, but her dreams turn to nightmares of sensual torment.

Fritz Leiber: *Conjure Wife/Our Lady of Darkness* Tor Fantasy, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$4.99. Two-in-one volume edition of two of Fritz Leiber's finest dark fantasy novels.

Stephen Leigh and John Miller: *Ray Bradbury Presents: Dinosaur Samurai* Avonova SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. A "time safari" to hunt dinosaurs goes wrong and sends ripples through time resulting in an alternate medieval Japan and blood-thirsty sentient dinosaurs. Includes a 16-page art insert.

S.N. Lewitt: *Songs of Chaos* Ace SF, pb orig, 240 pp, \$4.99. On an Earth where everyone is designed to be Normal, Dante McCall is a genetic "misfit." When he escapes government detention he's stranded with a group of starfarers whose culture is so far from "Normal" that Dante wonders if it's a trap for misfits . . . or if he's finally found a home.

Laurie J. Marks: *Dancing Jack* DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. For ten years Ash had thought she was the only member of her family to survive a bloody uprising against a repressive regime. When she learns her nephew may be alive, she searches for him, and begins to hope he may have inherited her family's magical talent.

Julian May: *Jack the Bodiless* Del Rey SF, 1st time in pb, \$5.99. Book 1 of *The Galactic Milieu* trilogy. This series blends mystery, intrigue and futuristic psychic phenomena as Earth in 2051 seeks acceptance into a galactic confederation of worlds.

Anne McCaffrey: *The Chronicles of Pern: First Fall* Del Rey, hc, 304 pp, \$22.00. A collection of Pern short stories, set during the early days of colonization and the time of Pern's first Threadfall. Most of the stories have never been published before. The collection celebrates the 25th anniversary of the publication of the original Pern novel, *Dragonflight*.

Donald E. McQuinn: *Wanderer* Del Rey SF, tr pb orig, 608 pp, \$10.00. Sequel to *Warrior*. A story of a post-apocalyptic Pacific Northwest, 500 years after nuclear war.

Christopher Moore: *Practical Demon-Keeping* St. Martin's Paperbacks, Horror, 1st time in pb, 256 pp, \$3.99. A funny horror novel about a man trying to get rid of the lovable but troublesome demon companion who gave him the gift of eternal life.

Daniel Keys Moran: *The Last Dancer* Spectra SF, pb orig, 608 pp, \$5.99. The fourth book in the *Tales of Continuing Time*. The Unification government prepares for riots in Occupied America as the former country approaches its Tri-Centennial. Two surviving Castanveras genetically engineered telepaths have their own parts to play.

Robert Morgan: *The Thing That Darkness Hides* Diamond Mystery, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50. Book 2 in a mystery series about a private investigator who takes on supernatural cases. In this case, Teddy London agrees to help a millionaire who says he sold his soul to the Devil and wants it back.

Andrew Neiderman: *After Life* Berkley Horror, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. A newly blind woman begins hearing strange voices in the cemetery—voices only she can hear.

Andre Norton: *Brother to Shadows* Avonova/Morrow Science Fantasy, hc, 320 pp, \$20.00. An adventure story about a young member of an order of spies, bodyguards, and assassins who is cast out to make his own way in a world filled with dangers.

Andre Norton and Susan Shwartz: *Empire of the Eagle* Tor Fantasy, hc, 416 pp, \$22.95. A collaboration about a young Roman legionnaire on a quest to recover the stolen emblem of Rome's power, a golden eagle. To succeed he must face demons, genies, and the entire pantheon of Indian gods.

Nicholas Pine: *Terror Academy: Student Body* Berkley YA Horror, pb orig, 192 pp, \$3.50. In this young adult horror series, a supernatural killer is stalking students at Central Academy high school.

Kevin Randle: *Galactic MI: The Rat Trap* Ace SF, pb orig, 192 pp, \$4.50. Book 2 in the Galactic MI series. When the fleet encounters an asteroid that may



be an alien spaceship, Galactic Military Intelligence is sent to investigate.

Mike Resnick & Martin Harry Greenberg, editors: *Christmas Ghosts* DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$5.50. An anthology of 27 original Christmas stories by Mercedes Lackey, Frank M. Robinson, Judith Tarr, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and others.

Karen Ripley: *The Persistence of Memory* Del Rey SF, pb orig, 240 pp, \$4.99. Book 1 of *The Slow Watch*. A woman who can communicate almost telepathically with her horse tries to regain her memory in a world she fears is not her own.

John Maddox Roberts: *Conan and the Treasure of Python* Tor Fantasy, tr pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. In this new Conan adventure, the mighty warrior faces pirates, ape-men, a sorcerer, and many other dangers while searching for the fabled treasure of Python.

Kenneth Robeson: *Doc Savage: The Forgotten Realm* Spectra SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. A new Doc Savage adventure, based on an outline by Lester Dent, who created the original Doc Savage. Tie-in with the 60th anniversary of Doc Savage publishing.

Kim Stanley Robinson: *Red Mars* Bantam SF, 1st time in pb, 672 pp, \$5.99. In 2026 colonists arrive on Mars to begin terraforming it, but there are those who will fight to keep it from being changed. The first book in a new trilogy about the colonization of Mars.

Pam Rock: *Moon of Desire* Love Spell Futuristic Romance, pb orig, 400 pp, \$4.99. A futuristic romance novel set on an alien world.

Mary Rosenblum: *Chimera* Del Rey Discovery SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$4.99. In a world where virtual reality is both favorite toy and vital tool, something is disrupting the Net and threatening to destroy both imaginary creations and real lives.



Sandy Schofield: *Star Trek Deep Space Nine #4: The Big Game* Pocket SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. When Quark hosts what may be the highest-stakes poker game of all time, players begin to die one by one.

Carol Severance: *Sorcerous Sea* Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Demon Drums* and *Storm Caller*. When Iuti killed the shark god to save the island realm, she upset the balance of power . . . and, unless she can restore balance in the Sea, a new evil will triumph.

Charles Sheffield: *Godspeed* Tor SF, hc, 352 pp, \$21.95. Thousands of planets were colonized using the alien Godspeed Drive technology. *Godspeed* is the story of a young man growing up on one of those colonies, isolated 200 years ago when the Drives suddenly, simultaneously self-destructed.

Dan Simmons: *Lovedeath* Warner SF/Horror, hc, 336 pp, \$19.95. A collection of SF and horror stories on the themes of love and death, by award-winning author Dan Simmons.

John Skipp and Craig Spector: *Animals* Bantam Horror, pb orig, 464 pp, \$5.99. An erotic new werewolf novel about how creatures of the night find their human prey in the modern world.

L.Neil Smith: *Pallas* Tor SF, hc, 480 pp, \$23.95. An adventure set on the new frontier—a colonial outpost in space where two groups of colonists are struggling for survival . . . and control.

George Turner: *The Destiny Makers* AvonNova SF, 1st time in pb, 336 pp, \$4.99. By the middle of the 21st century, Earth has become so overpopulated that medical treatment for the terminally ill is outlawed. But, secretly, one exception has been made, and the result threatens the future of civilization.

John Varley: *Millennium* Ace SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. In this time-travel



thriller, when two airliners collide a time-travel team from the future has already "rescued" the passengers, leaving prefabricated "bodies" in their place.

Kenneth Von Gunden: *The Sounding Stillness* Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Genetically altered humans and dolphins have been living in the seas of the water world Cousteau for decades. But now the native sentient whales are disturbed by the damage humans have caused their environment, and a human secret agent is sent to investigate and solve the problem.

James M. Ward & Anne K. Brown: *Pool of Twilight* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. This FORGOTTEN REALMS® novel introduces readers to a new hero of Phlan, a young would-be paladin who must find the stolen Hammer of Tyr to save his city from ruin.

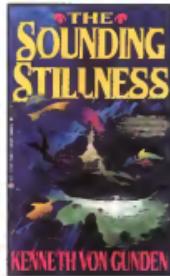
Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman, editors: *Leaves from the Inn of the Last Home* TSR Fantasy, hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. This DRAGONLANCE® source book, a collection of stories, legends, songs and other details about the lives of the Heroes of the Lance, is being reissued in hardcover. Includes an updated Timeline of Krynn.

Steve White: *The Disinherited* Baen SF, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. The U.S. Space Force is about to go out of business for lack of interest. Then peaceful aliens arrive, just in time to warn Earth that an alien hive mind is on the way—with conquest on their mind.

D.M. Wind: *The Others* Leisure Horror, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.50. A horror novel about shapeshifters who hunger for human flesh.

Jane Yolen: *The Briar Rose* Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 224 pp, \$4.99. A blend of the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty with the very real horrors of the Holocaust.

Timothy Zahn: *Cascade Point* Tor SF, pb reiss, 192 pp, \$2.95. Tor Double #2. The Hugo Award winning novella.



Ships in the Night

Jack McDevitt



Illustration by Ron Miller

Arnold was nearing the end of his first mile, moving methodically along the pebbled, grassy track at the edge of the tree line, looking out over the Red River of the North, when the wind first spoke to him.

It blew through the twilight. Branches creaked and newly fallen leaves rattled against the trunks of elms and boxwoods.

The forest sighed his name. Imagination, of course.

The river was loud around the bend. The jogging path crunched underfoot, and wings fluttered in the trees.

Arnold.

Clearer that time. A cold breeze rippled through him.

The sound died away, smoothed in the matted overhang.

He drew up gradually, slowed, stopped. Looked around. He blinked furiously at the trees. The river was gray in the failing light. "Is someone there?"

A sparrow soared out of a red oak and tracked through the sky, across the top of the wind screen, out over the water, over the opposite bank and into Minnesota. It kept going.

The current murmured past a clutch of dark rocks in the middle of the stream. Somewhere, in the distance, he heard

a garage door bang down. He pushed off again. But he ran more slowly.

Arnold.

He stopped again, tumbled to a halt. Froze.

There was no mistaking it this time; the sound was only a whisper, a distant sigh. But it spoke *his name*. Breathed it, exhaled it. It was compounded of river and wind and trees. He heard it in the wave that rolled up the pebbled shore, and in the tumble of dead leaves.

It was *not* a group of kids hiding behind boxwoods. It was *not* anybody he could imagine. It was *not* a human voice at all.

His heart pumped.

Courage had never been among Arnold Whitaker's virtues. He feared confrontation, feared doctors, feared pain, feared women. And, although he did not believe in ghosts, and in fact made it a point to smile cynically at tales of the supernatural or the paranormal, he had no taste for dark places, even for the short walk from his garage to his house when the moon was full. (He had, as a child, seen too many werewolf movies.)

He stopped near a black granite boulder, turned his back to the river, and surveyed the woods. He was in the wind screen that circled Fort Moxie, a narrow belt of trees seldom more than a hundred feet wide. No one moved among the box elders and cottonwoods. Nothing followed him down the jogging path. And, in a final sweep of the area, he saw that nothing floated on the river or stood on the opposite shore.

The black boulder was one of many in the area that the glaciers had pushed down from Manitoba, and deposited when they began their long retreat at the end of the last ice age. It stood about shoulder-high, and its rough surface was cool.

Arnold remained very still. The trees swayed gently in the early autumn wind. Birds sang. The river burbled.

Quickest way out was to leave the path, cut through the wind screen, and descend directly into town. But that required him to make an admission that he wasn't prepared to make. The day was far too pleasant, too sunny, too placid, to allow himself to be frightened by the wind. Wasn't that what they always said in haunted-house movies? *It's only the wind.*

He discovered that he was crouched beside the boulder. He forced himself to stand, and, with steps that suddenly took wing, he bolted. He followed the path in and out of the trees. Arnold ran full tilt, racing through filtered sunlight. Occasionally, where the path curved, he did not. He leaped over logs, cut across glades, pushed between bushes. He emerged frequently along the riverbank, only to plunge back into the trees. Eventually, still following the path, he veered away from the Red, and sliced downhill through the last vestiges of the wind screen. He was gasping when he came out onto Lev Anderson's fields, and crashed exhausted through the back door of the Fort Moxie Historical Center.

He scared the devil out of Emma Kosta, who was on duty, and her friend, Tommi Patmore. Emma jumped up from her chair and spilled a cup of tea, and Tommi, who was sitting with her back to the door when Arnold threw

it open, literally fell out of her chair. Arnold shut the door, tried to latch it, gave up, hurried to Tommi's aid, and had to go back and try again with the door because it didn't close tight, had never closed tight, and the wind blew it open.

In the end Tommi had to get herself back into her chair. Both ladies stared in bewilderment at Arnold. "Why, Arnold," said Emma, "whatever happened to you?"

He had virtually collapsed against the wall, exhausted by his effort, lungs heaving. "Why, nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. What makes you think anything happened?" He needed another thirty seconds before he could get out the rest of it: "I was jogging."

* * *

Arnold Whitaker was the proprietor and chief clerk at the Lock 'n' Bolt, Fort Moxie's hardware store. He was in his mid-thirties, a man of modest proportions and unremarkable features. He tended to be self-effacing, had never been known to offend anyone, and was generally mindful of the civilities: he held doors for women, told jokes only on himself, and spoke in carefully modulated tones. No one had ever heard Arnold raise his voice.

His customers thought of him as solid and dependable, in the way that a good wrench and good bolts are solid and dependable. Nothing fancy in his makeup, no slick housing or plugboard wiring; just good, plain metal, carved to specification, and used within the parameters of the instruction manual.

Arnold was a bachelor. He lived upstairs over the hardware store in a spartan two-bedroom apartment. The furniture clashed: the rattan table undermined the spirit of his roll-top desk; the seductive effect of the black fur-covered sofa was utterly destroyed by the conservative gold-brown wingback armchair. Arnold had acquired most of his furnishings at sales in Fargo and Grand Forks. His clothing also reflected a tendency to put considerations of budget over those of taste. Indeed, it might be said that Arnold's propensity for discounts reflected a natural tendency to avoid anything in life for which he might have to pay full value.

He owned a good television, twenty-seven inches with eight hundred lines of resolution and wraparound sound. (He spent a lot of time watching TV, and he'd gotten the price he wanted last Presidents' Day.) A high-priced discontinued stereo dominated the living room. Walls throughout the apartment had been converted into bookshelves, and they were filled with hardware catalogs and paperback technothrillers.

He slept in the middle room, which was anchored by a double bed that was seldom made up, and an ugly bureau missing several handles. (He was looking for a good replacement.) A smaller television and a VCR were set in one corner, and a rubber plant in another. A picture of a former girl friend whom he had not seen in years stood atop the bureau.

The back room looked out over the northwestern quarter of Fort Moxie. Houses in the border town were widely separated, even behind the commercial section. Lots were seldom smaller than a half-acre. Few streetlights burned back there, and consequently the area got thor-

oughly dark at night. Which was why Arnold had chosen his rear window to set up his telescope.

The telescope was perhaps the one thing Arnold owned that he had bought at retail. It was a 2080 Schmidt-Cassegrain reflector with a 25mm eyepiece. It gave him spectacular views of the moon, and of Jupiter and Saturn, especially on cold winter nights when the air seemed to crystallize, and the molecules and dust crackled and fell to earth, exposing the hearts of the great planets.

Arnold's secret ambition, one that he had never shared with anyone, was to find an incoming comet. To be there first, and to break the news. Comet Whitaker.

His neighbors knew about the telescope, and they assigned its existence to some minor idiosyncrasy, the exception to the general steady flow of Arnold's life.

Arnold, by the way, was liked by almost everyone. He did not give rise to passions: no one in Fort Moxie drifted off to sleep dreaming of him. And no one could recall ever having become really angry with him. He was just *there*, a presence downtown, reliable, polite, as much a part of the town as the post office or Route 11 or the wind screen. What people liked most about him (though probably no one could have put it in words) was that Arnold *really* enjoyed hardware. Hammers and chisels, their polished wood stocks gleaming, the metal heads bright and clean, delighted him. He handled jacks and screwdrivers and boxes of tacks and lighting fixtures with obvious affection. And even his younger customers made the connection between Arnold's solid, dependable life style, and the nuts and bolts of his trade.

On the evening of the incident in the tree belt, which was the first unplanned occurrence in Arnold's life since the Flood of '78, he returned to the store in a state of considerable disarray. He locked both downstairs doors and checked all the windows, a routine he didn't always follow in crime-free Fort Moxie. And he retreated upstairs into the back room, where he sat a long time beside the telescope, watching darkness fall across the distant tree line.

He never doubted that he had in fact heard his name out there. Arnold was far too solid, too stable, to question his senses. He did not believe it was a prank, did not see how a prank could have been executed.

But what, then, was it? In the good hard light of his room, he could dismiss the supernatural. But what remained? Was it possible that some trick of the wind, some unlikely chance pattern of branches and air currents and temperatures had produced a sound so close to 'Arnold' that his mind had filled in the rest?

For almost an hour, he sat with his chin propped against his hands, staring through the window at the distant treetops.

Later, he went out to dinner, down to Clint's. That was a treat, but tonight he felt entitled. He wanted people around him.

* * *

The usual routine was that Arnold opened up at nine. He had two part-timers: Janet Hasting, a housewife who relieved him at lunchtime; and Dean Walloughby, a teenager who came in at three. If things were quiet, Arnold worked on his inventory, or his taxes, and made the trip

to the bank. They closed at five. Dean went home, and Arnold went jogging.

But today, the day after the incident Arnold had begun to think of as The Encounter, complete with capitals, he had a decision to make. He enjoyed running. He especially enjoyed the solitude of the tree belt, and running against the wind off the prairie. He liked the clean rock-and-water smell of the Red River, and the far-off sound of air horns on I-29. It was just after Labor Day, and Fort Moxie's short summer was fading fast. He did not like to lose what little good weather was left, especially to an aberration, a trick of the senses.

Arnold had been unnerved by the experience. He trembled at the prospect of going there again, understood he could keep away and no one would ever know he had given in to his fear. He might wonder for a time what had actually happened out there, but he knew that eventually he would assign the event to an active imagination.

That seemed the safer course.

Yes. He would stay clear. No point tempting fate. Why ask for trouble? This afternoon, he would confine himself to running in town. Getting near the end of the season anyway. And having made his decision, he welcomed Janet Hasting in at eleven, and went to lunch shortly after with a clear conscience.

Arnold nodded to the small crowd of regulars in Clint's and drew up a chair beside Floyd Rickett, who was dismembering a BLT. Floyd was tall, gray, sharp-nosed, pinched-looking, well pressed in his postal uniform. He harbored strong opinions, and a strong sense of the importance of his own time. *Cut to the bottom line*, he was fond of saying, jabbing with the three middle fingers of his right hand. Floyd did a great deal of jabbing: he jabbed his way into conversations, jabbed through political opposition down at the club (where he was recording secretary), jabbed through lines and crowds. *Life is short. No time to waste. Cut to the bottom line.* At the post office, he specialized in sorting out problems caused by the general public. Floyd tolerated no sloppy wrapping, no barely-legible handwriting, no failure to add the proper zip code.

"You look upset," he said, targeting Arnold.

Arnold sat down, and shook his head. "I'm fine."

"I don't think so," Jab. "Your color's not good." Jab. "And you're avoiding eye contact." Slice.

Arnold immediately tried to establish eye contact. But it was too late. "Something odd happened to me yesterday."

Bottom line. "What?" Floyd leaned forward with interest. Odd occurrences, especially of the sort that could drain the equanimity from as solid a citizen as Arnold Whitaker, were rare in Fort Moxie.

"I don't know how to explain this, exactly." Arnold looked up as Aggie came over to take his order. When she had gone, he repeated his observation.

"Just get to the point," said Floyd.

"I was jogging in the wind screen yesterday. I go there every day, after I close up."

Floyd shifted his weight.

"I heard a voice," Arnold said.

Floyd took another bite out of his BLT, chewed, and

frowned when nothing more was forthcoming. "I give up," he said at last. "Whose voice?"

"There wasn't anyone there."

"Must have been somebody. There was somebody behind a tree."

"No."

"Then what's the point?"

"It wasn't a voice like yours or mine. What I mean is, it wasn't a person's voice at all."

Floyd frowned. "What other kinds of voices are there?"

"I don't know."

"Okay. What did it say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Well, it called my name."

"And that's it?"

"Yes."

Floyd tilted his head, smiled, and finished his iced tea. "Got to go," he said. He had recognized that this was a conversation *without* a bottom line. No time to waste on it. "Listen, Arnold, what you heard was an echo. Or the wind. Wind plays funny tricks sometimes." He patted his lips with his napkin. "Maybe you need to take a few days off."

So Arnold went back to the store, and reconsidered his decision to stay away from the wind screen. He could not allow himself to be frightened off from something he really enjoyed doing. Especially when he had no explanation to offer, even to himself. By two o'clock, he had decided to confront whatever might be lurking (and that was the word that kept coming to mind) in the trees. And damn the consequences. But over the next hour, the forces of caution stormed back and retook the hill.

He considered inviting Dean, his part-timer, to go with him. But how would he explain the request? And anyway the kid was in terrible shape, and would only slow him down if a quick exit became necessary.

By the end of the business day, he had changed his mind several times, and finally settled on a compromise: he would stay out of the trees, but he would run as close to them as he could get, while remaining on the streets.

His usual regimen, after locking up and changing into his sweat suit, was to drive down and park at the Historical Center, then run back along Bannister Avenue through town, and connect with the jogging path on the west side. Then he would follow it around the northern perimeter of Fort Moxie, passing the site of The Encounter, and eventually come out at the Historical Center. The route was about five miles long. He never actually *ran* that distance, couldn't run that far, but he used a combination of jogging and walking. And sometimes he stopped altogether. Frequently did so, in fact. All in all, he might need anywhere from an hour and a quarter to two hours to complete the course.

Today, of course, would be different. To start with, he left his car in the garage. He started out along Bannister, cruising past the post office and the bank and the Prairie Schooner Bar and Mike's Supermarket and the Intown Video Store. But, instead of continuing all the way out to the western side, he turned north at Fifth Street, cutting

across the leaf-strewn grounds of the Thomas Jefferson Elementary School.

Directly ahead, about six blocks, he could see the line of elms and boxwoods. The treetops rolled in a brisé prairie wind. They looked harmless enough. They also looked deep: when he'd been a boy, Arnold's imagination had delighted in turning the narrow belt of trees into thick woods. That childhood Fort Moxie had been a redoubt carved out of a vast forest, rather than a lonely outpost on the prairie.

He left the school behind, cruised past homes and the bake shop and the North Star Apartments. Two blocks up from Bannister, he passed Floyd's house. It was a pale green, immaculately kept two-story frame, with an enclosed front porch. Two box elders grew in a spacious, freshly raked front yard. (The leaves had been bagged, and lined a side wall.) Broad manicured hedges marked its boundaries. A carefully arranged assortment of bushes implied the owner's almost obsessive taste for symmetry and order. The evening newspaper, the *Grand Forks Herald*, lay folded in the middle of the lawn.

His red Nissan was parked in the driveway. And the man himself appeared at the door, waved to Arnold, and strolled out toward his newspaper.

Arnold waved back.

"Look out for the thing in the woods," he called as Arnold passed.

Shouldn't have said anything. Arnold increased his pace slightly, felt his cheeks grow warm.

He was now approaching the Fort Moxie Library.

The library was the town's pride. The taxpayers had supported a bond issue, an architect from Bismarck had designed the structure to resemble a little Greek temple, and contributions of both books and money kept the institution well funded.

The Greek temple commanded the top of a rise surrounded by lawns which had just begun to turn brown. Two elms, a flagpole, a statue of a cavalry soldier (from the days when the town was *really* a fort), and a few verbena and honeysuckle bushes contributed to a sense of disconnectedness from the world outside. The library was a time warp, located in a town that did not even have a police officer. It was part Hellenic, part 1910. A pebbled walkway, lined with green benches, curved through the grounds. The benches were occupied by teenagers, or by older residents enjoying the late summer. And one, the one directly in front of the temple, facing it, held a stranger, a young woman Arnold had never seen before. She was, he was quick to note as his breath left him and he ran off the side of the curb, a woman of surpassing beauty.

It would have been an exaggeration to say that Arnold never had luck with women. There had been a few in his life, perhaps a half-dozen who had bedded down with him, and even one or two who might have gone to the altar with him. But none of these, in the full blaze of daylight, were able to fire his boilers, so to speak. The women who might have been capable of doing that always frightened him, and so they inevitably ended up on someone else's arm while Arnold kept his fragile ego intact. He could say, to his shame, that no truly beautiful woman had ever rejected him.

The woman on the bench was truly beautiful.

She had liquid green eyes, and red-blond hair cut shoulder length. When she moved, the hair swirled and caught the light. Her features were finely chiseled, aristocratic in the finest sense, illuminated by an inner energy that drove Arnold's blood pressure well into the danger zone. Her expression suggested quite clearly that she would be unapproachable.

A book lay open on her lap, and a worn imitation leather briefcase had fallen over at her feet. She wore a conservative light brown blouse, and a conservative dark brown skirt.

Needless to say, it would never have occurred to Arnold to alter course, to venture a *bello* or even a wave as he went by. Rather, he simply continued on, watching as best he could until he had crossed Patcher Street, and the beautiful young woman passed from sight behind Kaz Juhansen's yellow frame house.

Fifth Street just more or less stopped, went to dirt, and played out along a block where several houses were currently under construction, where only Al Conway actually lived. Arnold passed Al's place and continued to the end of the street.

There was an empty lot back there, beyond the construction, covered with thick grass and dead leaves. The lot mounted gradually into the wind screen. Arnold slowed but did not stop. He wondered if the issue had ever been in doubt as he picked his way across uneven ground, moved up the short slope, and entered the trees.

The stated purpose of the tree belts is to protect towns from the winds that whip the prairie. During the previous spring, a poet who had come from St. Louis to speak at the library had said the real reason for wind screens had nothing to do with the wind; it was that it hurt people to look at all that emptiness, all the way to the horizon, so they built walls around themselves. The poet, Arnold guessed, had never been in Fort Moxie during the winter.

The narrow belt of woodland was very quiet.

He slowed to a walk. The wind moved softly through the upper branches, through patterns of sunlight. His fears had eased: the wood felt so unthreatening, so peaceful, that the incident of the day before seemed unreal, and very far away. These trees were his. Nothing frightening could move among them.

He picked up his pace. The jogging path came in from the left, and he eased onto it. The air was cool and invigorating, but he knew it harbored the first suggestions of the long winter to come.

He thought about calling out to the voice. Challenging it. *Hey, Voice. I'm back.* But he hadn't recovered that much of his courage. The forest moved. Branches swung, and insects whispered in bushes, and the sounds of his passage echoed back at him.

The river appeared, off to the northeast. He was drawing close to the spot where The Encounter had occurred.

Arnold slowed down, moving at a deliberate pace, saving his energy. The path had swung now to the far side of the trees, the outside of the screen, where it continued while the river angled in. The black boulder loomed ahead.

He stopped.

The wind drew at him, pulled at his clothes, rippled across the grass.

"Are you here?" he asked, very softly, not entirely sure he had mouthed the words at all.

The branches creaked and sighed.

The river flowed.

Feeling much better, Arnold broke into a brisk, triumphant trot.

The wind picked up. It smelled of water and green bushes. The foliage moved. The daylight changed complexion, as if something had come between him and the sun. There were clouds in the sky, toward the east. The sky was beginning to darken.

And the wind spoke.

Do not—

Arnold's knees locked. He tumbled, sprawled flat. There was nothing behind him. Nothing anywhere he could see. The sound had a stereo quality: it came from all directions.

—be afraid.

If there was anything more likely to terrify Arnold than a visitation in a lonely glade, it was an injunction, from whatever source, not to panic. He crouched on the ground, heart pounding. No one moved among the trees. The river was quiet, and the path was empty, as far as he could see. The voice was too close to have come from the opposite bank.

No human throat could have made that leafy, gurgling, windblown sound. "Who's there?"

His heart fluttered, and his breath caught, but he was able to keep the previous day's sickening panic at bay.

Hello, Arnold. The treecops rolled slowly back and forth, as if a giant unseen hand played with them. *I was hoping you would come back.*

A warm breeze touched his cheek.

"Where are you?"

Here. Something like light laughter raced through the foliage. *I'm beside you.*

"Where? Show yourself." Arnold struggled against rising panic.

There is nothing to show.

"Say again?"

There is nothing to see. Unless the light is right.

Got to be a trick. Somebody had to be recording this. Was he going to hear it played at the Elks next Saturday night? "Whoever you are, I don't care for the game." He was still not speaking loudly. "Is that you, Floyd?"

Silence rolled out of the trees and off the river.

A gush blew across the glade in which he hid. *Who is Floyd?*

"A friend."

A friend who plays tricks?

"I don't know. Where are you, Floyd?"

There is no one here but you and I.

"Who are you? Really?"

A visitor.

"A tourist?"

You could put it that way. Listen, Arnold, why don't you sit down? You don't look at all comfortable.

"Why don't you come out where I can see you? What are you afraid of? How do you do the voice trick?"

I am in your field of vision.

"Where? Are you behind a tree?"

That soft laughter again, rippling through the elms and boxwoods. *I am at your side, Arnold.* A sudden current of warm air flowed around him. *I am pleased to have an opportunity to talk with you.*

Arnold was still watching the woods. "What is it? Speakers hidden around here somewhere?"

You're hard to convince.

"Convince about what?"

Okay. If you want, I'll do a demonstration. Pick a tree.

"What?"

Pick a tree. Any tree. It sounded impatient.

"Okay." He pointed toward an American elm. "That one." It was the biggest tree in the area, about sixty feet high. Its trunk was maybe twenty-five feet in circumference, covered with thick gray-brown bark. About a third of the way up, it divided into stout branches, dividing and subdividing into the leafy web that connected it with its neighbors. A squirrel clung to the furrowed trunk, its dark eyes locked on him.

Watch, now.

"I'm watching."

Overhead, the wind stirred. The upper branches creaked, moved, began to sway. They rolled in a single, synchronized dance, as they might during a gale. But the air where Arnold stood was almost still.

Leaves fell. And twigs. They drifted down through the graying light.

Arnold's mouth went dry. "What are you?" he asked slowly. "What do you want?"

I'm a sightseer. A traveler.

"Why can't I see you, Traveler? Are you invisible?"

Not really. Is the wind invisible?

"Yes," he said. "Of course it is."

Ob.

"I don't really understand what's going on." Cautiously: "You're not a ghost, are you?"

No. There are some advanced species in which the essence survives the body. But we are not among them.

Arnold frowned, and thought over the implications. "Am I?" he asked.

Ob, no. Of course not. At least, I don't think so. No. Not a chance.

"Where do you come from?"

Most recently, I've been exploring the prairies.

"No, I mean, where did you come from originally?"

Where were you born?"

I was not born, in your sense of the word. The wood fell silent. Arnold listened to far-off noises, air horns, a dog, an airplane. *I suppose it will do no harm. I saw my first sunrise on an artificial world quite far away. My sun is not visible from here. At least, it is not visible to me. And I doubt that it is to you.*

Arnold's strength drained. Perhaps until this moment, he had expected that things would sort themselves out in some sort of rational way. But now he knew he had come face to face, so to speak, with the twilight zone. "Are you an alien?" he asked.

That's a matter of perspective. But if we're going to

indulge in name-calling and categorizing, you might keep your own simian characteristics in mind.

"No, listen. I'm serious. And you're not hostile, right?"

A sudden breeze swirled around his ankles. *Intelligent life forms are, by definition, rational. Reasonable.*

"Marvelous." He was up on his feet again. "Listen, Traveler, I'm happy to meet you. I'm Arnold—" He stopped. "You knew my name before you ever spoke to me."

Yes.

"How is that? What's going on? You're not the vanguard of an invasion, are you?"

We're not much interested in invading, Arnold. That's more in your tradition.

"How does it happen you knew my name?"

I know a few people in Fort Moxie. I don't spend all my time up here in the wind screen, you know.

"Who else have you spoken to?"

No one.

"Nobody else knows you're here?" Arnold was having visions of his picture on the cover of *Time*.

No.

"Why did you speak to me?"

Again, Arnold felt the movement of air currents. *Because I wanted to talk.*

"About what?"

Just talk.

"Are you alone?"

Yes. I am.

"Why me?"

I don't understand.

"Why me? Why not Alex Wickham? Or Tom Lasker? Why talk to me?" Arnold wasn't sure why he pursued the point. Maybe there was something special about himself, something that this supernatural creature could see in him that the townspeople couldn't. If he possessed a special quality, he should know about it.

You're almost the only one who comes out here. Mrs. Henney jogs in the morning, but she's a trifle nervous, and if I revealed myself to her, I suspect she'd have a cardiac arrest on the spot.

"But you said you travel through town, too."

I do. But I can't communicate with anyone there. Not enough trees. And no water.

"What do you mean?"

I do not have a tongue, Arnold. As you can perceive, I speak by manipulating other substances. I'm quite good at it, actually.

The Traveler sounded proud of itself. If any sense of disquiet still lingered in Arnold's soul, it was dispelled at that moment. "Listen, how would you feel about talking to a reporter?"

I don't think so.

"Why not? This is a world-shaking event. First contact with another intelligent being."

I won't ask who else is presumed in that equation to be intelligent. But no, thank you. I only wanted to talk with you. Not with the world.

"But nobody will believe this if I don't get a witness out here. How about Floyd Rickett, then? Would you talk to him?"

It laughed. A cascade of leaves and twigs exploded among the upper branches of a box elder.

I wonder if I made a bad choice.

"Okay. Okay, listen, don't get mad. All right? What did you want to talk about?"

Nothing in particular.

"You don't have a message? A warning? Something you want me to pass on?"

You have a strong sense of the melodramatic. No: I just saw you coming here every day, and I thought it would be nice to say hello.

"Well, that's ridiculous. This is the first contact between two intelligent species, and all we get to say is *hello*?"

Arnold, this is probably not the first contact. The rules get broken all the time. And anyway, what more significant greeting is there?

"You mean there've been others before this?"

Of course. Not with me, understand. But, statistically, you're insignificant. What are the odds that you would hold the first conversation with someone from another world?

"Then why haven't I heard about it? Why hasn't it been on TV?"

Because we're not supposed to do it. Nobody is going to pose for cameras. Listen, I've got to be going.

"You mean this is all there is to it?"

I'm afraid so, Arnold. It's been nice to talk with you.

Wait a minute—

Probably it would be best not to say anything to anybody. You know how people are. And by the way, there is a reason I picked you. Other than simply because you happened to come out here.

That felt better. "What was it?"

The telescope. I like people who want to see what's really out there. Beyond the horizon. You know what I mean?

"Listen. Traveler. Will I see you again? I mean, talk to you again? Do you live here?"

The river gurgled against the inshore rocks. *I've been using this as a base. Yes. Sure. Stop by again. Anytime.*

Arnold was on his feet now. "One more thing?"

Sure.

"I don't know what to call you. Do you have a name?"

We don't use names.

"I've got to have something to call you.

Make one up.

Traveler.

That would be nice. I like that.

"Will you be here when I come back?"

Can't promise. But I usually return about this time.

Arnold looked at the tallest tree in the area, the American elm which had served in the demonstration. He felt as if he were talking to it: "I enjoyed meeting you."

And I, you. Goodnight, Arnold.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

A warm breeze swirled around him, then dashed across the river. A burst of foam leaped high.

* * *

Arnold charged back through the trees and ran south on Fifth Street, full of exuberance. First thing was to find

someone to tell. Arch Johnson was out on his front porch, and Sal and Ed Morgan were hauling firewood back to their shed. Amos Sigursen was bent under the hood of his pickup. He wanted to go to each of them and clap his hands on their shoulders and say, *Hey, I've just talked with a visitor from another world; it's up in the wind screen*, but each time he visualized the reaction, knew they would squint at him and joke around, or maybe just squint. He thought about going up and pounding on Floyd's door, tell *bim* what he'd seen. But Floyd was too much of a no-nonsense type, and he wouldn't believe a word of it unless the Traveler was with him, and willing to maybe poke Floyd in the eye.

So he arrived home, with the secret of the ages still securely tucked inside his sweatshirt. He went through the back entrance, climbed to the second floor, and threw himself across his bed within reach of the phone.

But there wasn't even anyone to call. Arnold didn't have much of a family. Just a couple of uncles and aunts who already thought he was demented because he had never left his remote border town. And on that evening, flushed with the joy of his discovery, he realized that he knew no one with whom he could share a significant experience. The most satisfying outcome he could think of would be to drag Floyd out to the wind screen, and show him how wrong he had been. And that was pathetic.

He showered, sat down at his roll-top desk, and pulled out a legal pad. He wrote out everything he could remember about his conversation with the wind creature. He recorded not only the text of their conversation, but his impressions of the size of the thing (larger than the biggest elm), the suggestion of movement among the trees, and his estimates as to temperature and wind direction. I'll write a book on this one day, he told himself. And he wanted to be prepared right from the start.

There were also questions that needed to be answered. *Where are you from? What do you think of the human race? What kind of anatomy do you have? How do your senses work?* He recorded them more or less as they occurred to him, filling pages, and stacking the pages in a neat pile.

It had finally grown dark. (Fort Moxie was on the western edge of the Central Time Zone. The sun stayed quite late in the evening sky.) He sat by his window, looking toward the wind screen, not able to see it except as a deeper darkness toward the north. And he wondered whether the Traveler was up there now, moving among the trees, watching what was happening in Fort Moxie. But what would be the point of that? Nothing ever really happened in Fort Moxie. Of what possible interest could the small border town be to an entity from another world?

The night was filled with stars. Although he could not see it from his rear window, a new moon ruled the sky. The town lay quiet beneath its scattered streetlights. It pleased him to think of Fort Moxie as a place where history had been made. He wondered whether its name might one day become synonymous with a new age. The Fort Moxie Event.

Arnold never drank alone. In fact, he rarely drank at all. Weight was not a problem for him, yet, but he knew it

would be if he indulged his taste for cold beer in any regular fashion. But tonight was an exception. It deserved recognition, it needed a marker, something to remember years from now.

He did not keep beer in the refrigerator, but he had brandy. (He didn't like brandy, but it had been a birthday present from the guys at the Elks.) He pulled the bottle out of the cabinet where he kept his pots, popped the cork, and put a little bit into a glass. He stood beside his telescope, rubbed its gray-green barrel with satisfaction, and raised the glass in the general direction of the wind screen. *Here's to you, Traveler. And to the future.*

Tomorrow, he would find a way to talk the creature into submitting to a TV interview.

* * *

Arnold woke in his armchair. The recollections of the previous day's events flooded back. *Not a dream.* A cup of cold coffee stood on a side table. *It's really out there.* Yellow pages filled with his scrawl were piled on the black fur sofa.

And it's friendly. And talkative.

He went back into his bedroom and looked out the window. The wind screen was hazy and unreal in the gray light.

He showered and dressed and ate breakfast with enthusiasm. This would be a day to really move the hardware. By God, he felt good, and, at nine o'clock sharp, he threw the doors of the Lock 'n' Bolt open to the world. It would never have occurred to Arnold to leave the store closed for the day, to return to the site of the Encounter, and savor the moment. The Lock 'n' Bolt was nothing if not reliable. He prided himself that no local catastrophe had ever forced him to close down during business hours. He had ridden out the Flood of '78, the blizzards of '87 and '88, the great Christmas storm of '91, and even the '92 tornado. Didn't matter. Whatever happened in the cosmic order, Fort Moxie could be certain the Lock 'n' Bolt would open promptly at nine. Order and continuity was what made the American people great.

During the course of the day, he waited on the usual number of customers, experienced a run on mallets (folks were changing over from screens to windows), showed Ep Colley what was wrong with his lawn mower, advised Myra Schijenholde how to install her paneling. Tom Pratkowski bought one of the new Super Convex snowblowers, and there was some movement in block heaters. These people were all his friends and neighbors, and Arnold wanted to take them aside, was dying to grab them by the collar and tell them what was happening. But Ep would never have understood about extraterrestrials. (Ep wasn't entirely sure where Jupiter was.) And Myra was far too absorbed in visualizing how her new living room was going to look to care about a voice in the wind screen. And so it went. One needed a kindred soul for an announcement of this magnitude. And the day dragged on while Arnold looked for the kindred soul.

When Dean came in, he finished up his paper work, made a quick run to a supplier over in Hallock for some rakes, and got back just before five. They locked the store, and Arnold wasted no time changing into his jogging gear.

He picked up the questions he'd written out the night before and stuffed them into a sleeve. Today he was ready. And when he came back this evening, he would have a few answers. And, he hoped, he would have persuaded the Traveler to hold a press conference.

He took the short route, up Fifth Street. He moved quickly today, his usual easy pace discarded for a sprint. The streets were full of kids tossing footballs. The weather had cooled off, and the sun rode in a cloudless sky. He knew that when he breasted the trees, the world would open all the way to the horizon.

The lovely young woman with the red-blond hair was in front of the library again. She was on a different bench, on the far side near the parking lot. He caught his breath and slowed down. She sat with one knee crossed over the other, apparently absorbed in her book. The routine traffic of a Wednesday afternoon flowed around her, teenagers, and mothers with young children, and some of the town's retired folks.

But it was all backdrop. The benches and the box elders, the people and the frame houses across the street, even the little Greek library itself, all became the stage on which she performed. Arnold kept going, putting one foot before the other, not knowing what else to do. Maybe there was some place where a meeting would be inevitable, where she could be approached without his having to hang himself out on the line. Maybe if he became world-famous as the friend of the Wind-Creature, the man who had presided over the ultimate historic event, the situation would become more favorable.

Pardon me, Arnold. I know we've never met, but I was wondering if we could go someplace and talk about the Traveler.

She glanced up. Arnold wasn't quick enough, got caught staring. And for a single, riveting moment, their eyes swept across each other, not quite connecting. Even from his considerable distance, he felt her power.

That is, if it wouldn't be too much trouble.

He floated across the street, his hopes rising, seeing for the first time the full possibilities of the situation.

Arnold on 60 Minutes: And what were your thoughts, Mister Whitaker, when you first realized you were speaking to a being from another world?

The library, and the woman, passed out of sight behind Conway's house. *The National Academy of Sciences wishes to present its highest award, the—* What sort of award did they give out, anyway? —*the Schrödinger's Cat Medal to Arnold Whitaker, owner of the Lock 'n' Bolt Hardware Store in Fort Moxie, North Dakota.*

The empty lot at the foot of Fifth Street was rutted, and the ruts were covered by thick grass. Arnold slowed down, but he was still moving too fast when he left the unpaved roadway and started up the slope toward the trees. He lost his footing almost immediately on the uneven ground, and sprawled forward. But he suffered no damage other than a skinned knee. He limped the rest of the way into the wind screen.

The trees closed over him. He crunched through underbrush thick with piles of leaves. Birds sang and fluttered overhead. He pushed his hands into his pockets

and walked jauntily through the narrow belt of woodland. The one fear he now had was that the Traveler might somehow be gone. Had second thoughts, perhaps. Or maybe the whole business had resulted from some massive breakdown of physical law which had now healed.

He wanted to cry out to the Traveler, to shout a greeting into the trees, but he was still too close to the Fort Moxie side of the belt. Wouldn't do to have people notice that old Arnle is up in the trees talking to himself.

He found the jogging path and followed it out to the river, and finally to the black boulder, where he stopped. He listened for several minutes, and heard nothing unusual. "Traveler," he said in a conversational tone, "are you here?"

The wind rose. *Arnold, why do you travel relentlessly around the outer boundary of so lonely a place?*

The starkness of the question threw him momentarily off balance. "I like to jog," he said.

The river murmured sleepily.

"I'm glad you came back. I wasn't sure you would."

Neither was I.

"But you did."

Yes.

"Where do you go when you're not here?"

The prairie. The wind blew harder. *I love riding the gales through the prairie.*

"But you must have *gone* somewhere, right? Grand Forks, maybe? Fargo?"

Just the prairie.

Arnold looked off to the west, across the vast pool table-flat land. It was deadly dull. He wondered whether his visitor might not be too bright. My God, what a disaster that would be. The first visitor from the stars, and it turns out to be a bit slow. "You said something yesterday about *rules*. Who makes the rules? Is there some sort of government out there?"

There's a civilization.

"What kind of civilization?"

I don't know. What kinds are there? Other than where people are civil? It chuckled.

"I mean, is it one of those things like in *Star Trek*, with a lot of worlds?"

I do not know the reference.

Arnold surreptitiously slid his legal sheets out of his sleeve. "Why are you here?" he asked casually.

I answered that yesterday.

"You said you were a tourist. But what are you interested in? Architecture? Our technology? What?"

I'm interested in riding the wind.

"Oh." Arnold felt mildly piqued. "Is that all?"

This is such a violent world. It is very enjoyable.

"Violent?" He felt a chill rise from somewhere deep down: it sounded so pleased with the idea. "The world, this world, isn't violent. We haven't had a crime in Fort Moxie since the 1930's. And, well, we have wars occasionally. But we keep them small."

I'm not talking about people, Arnold. I mean the climate.

"The climate?"

Yes. Your atmosphere is turbulent. Exciting. For ex-

ample, in this area, a fifty-mile-an-hour wind is not at all unusual.

"So what?"

I come from a place that is composed of glades and meadows and quiet streams. It's always very still. Very peaceful. Dull. You know what I mean? Not like here.

Arnold found a nearby log and sat down. "What about us?"

Who?

"Us. People. What's your connection with us?"

I don't have a connection with you.

"You're only interested in the prairies? Is that what you're saying?"

I'm interested in your thermal currents. In your gusts and gales and storms.

Arnold laughed. "And you don't care about us?"

What's to care about? No, I like to be driven across the sky. Arnold, you have no idea what a rousing, delicious atmosphere you live in.

"Well, I know it gets a little brisk."

You're a solid, Arnold. You're safe. If I were caught out on the prairie, or even in here, by a strong gale, I would be scattered beyond recovery.

"Then why are you here at all? Why don't you go someplace safe? Like New York?"

If I'd wanted safety, I'd have stayed home.

"That's why you come to the wind screen," said Arnold. "It's a refuge for you. Right?"

Very good. Yes, it's comforting to settle in for the night among these trees.

"How did you get here? To Earth, I mean. Did you come in a UFO?"

What's a UFO?

"Unidentified flying object. They've been seen all over. Some people think they're interstellar ships."

Oh.

"Well? Did you come in one?"

Oh, no. Sealed up in a ship, traveling between the stars? No, thank you. I don't think anyone would go anywhere if they had to travel around like that. Are you sure about these objects?

"No. Not really."

If I were you, I wouldn't take those stories too seriously.

Arnold consulted his list. "You *did* stay here last night?"

Yes.

Did you sleep?"

Reasonably well, thank you.

You do sleep, then?"

Of course. Arnold, everyone sleeps. It's a universal phenomenon.

Do you dream?"

Oh, yes.

Insects murmured. "About what?"

A sudden breeze lifted his notes from his hands. He watched the yellow pages sail high into the air, where a sharp draft caught them and blew them out over the river. They fluttered down into the water. *I'd rather just talk idly*, said the Traveler. *I really have no interest in being interviewed.*



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"I'm sorry," said Arnold.

It's all right.

"I mean, I just wanted to be sure I didn't miss asking you something important."

There was a restlessness in the trees.

I suppose I shouldn't have started this.

The air stirred and began to move. "What's happening?"
Goodby, Arnold.

"Please don't go." Air currents whispered through the foliage.

"Hey," he called after it, "Why are you alone? What happened to the other one?"

The evening grew still.

You are perceptive, Arnold.

"So what happened?"

Listen, let it go, bub?

"An accident?" After a long moment: "I'm sorry."

I'll survive.

"When will you go home?"

When they realize I haven't returned. They'll need to mount a rescue party.

"Who will?"

Never mind. It's not easy to explain.

"So how long?"

Hard to say. Could be tomorrow. More likely next spring.

"How will you know when they've come?"

They won't exactly come. But they'll be able to find me.

"The one you lost: was it a mate?"

Ripples on the river. *The term has connotations that do not apply.*

"I'm sorry."

Branches swung. *Walk with me.*

"Sure. Which way?"

Toward the highway. Along the riverbank.

The air was warm and smelled of berries and mint.

"How long will you stay here? In Fort Moxie?"

I don't know. Until I decide to leave.

"Just follow the wind, huh?" Arnold grinned, pleased with himself.

He walked slowly. The river flowed, and the forest moved, and the sun sank in the west. The Traveler didn't say much. It seemed rather to react to the changing colors of the landscape, and to the occasional bursts of high wind out of the north.

Look to your left.

"What? What is it?" Arnold peered into the open spaces between the trees. There was *nothing*. Maybe a corner of Mark Hassle's garage.

Butterfly.

He had to reprogram, change his perspective. Color fluttered in the sunlight. A monarch. Black and orange, it spread its wings and moved with magnificent unconcern over a honeysuckle.

It is unique to Earth.

He felt the woodland breathe. A passing breeze lifted the insect. It flew a zigzag course and settled onto a leaf.

"End of summer," said Arnold. "It'll be too cold soon."

They talked about wind currents and the hardware store and Arnold's telescope. *I envy you*, said the Traveler.

"Why?"

I cannot look through a telescope.

Arnold frowned. "You *do* have eyes?"

No. But I am not without vision. In its turn, the Traveler tried to describe how it felt to ride before the wind, gliding silently over the vast swaying grasslands. *It is best to stay low, near the ground. You get a sense of movement there. Higher, in the clouds, everything becomes very still.*

Occasionally, the Traveler moved off through the trees. It seemed restless, and branches and bushes swayed in its passage. "Is anything wrong?" he asked at last.

Why do you ask?

"You move around so much."

It is my nature. I cannot easily remain in one place.

The sun had dropped to the horizon. "I'd like to ask a favor," said Arnold. He'd been hoping the Traveler would give him an opening, say something that would allow him to introduce the possibility of bringing other people out to the wind screen. Arnold had, say, Ted Koppel in mind. But no opportunity had presented itself, and so he had decided to act directly. "I have a friend who would give almost anything to talk with you."

No.

"I've told him that you were up here, and he asked to meet you." Two squirrels dashed across the path and scurried up a tree. "It wouldn't hurt anything. Just a few words, you know? Just say *bello*, the way you did with me." He felt a surge of desperation. "It isn't fair, you know. I mean, *you* started this. You didn't mind using me just so you could have somebody to talk to. But you don't care very much what it does to *me*. I've got the biggest secret in the world, and I can't tell anybody."

The Traveler did not respond.

"It's easy for you, isn't it? Not *your* problem." The north wind stirred the leaves. "Well, you can sit out here for the rest of the winter as far as I'm concerned. I'm not coming back."

And Arnold walked heavily away on the jogging path. He was still walking, and feeling absurd, when he crossed Lev Anderson's fields and came out behind the Historical Center.

* * *

In a way that he was hard pressed to define, the sheer un-earthliness of The Encounter seemed to be dwindling. The prickle along the backbone, the deep fears, the sense of wonder, faded. Despite its ethereal structure, the Traveler possessed a harder reality than, say, Mrs. Mike Kramer, who came in with her husband and, while he selected a hammer, gabbled on about the church choir's next project. Or Bill Pepperdine, the high school football coach, who was worried about the low level of ferocity in his offensive line this year.

Floyd Rickett came in around three, and jabbed his way through several customers taking advantage of Arnold's annual autumn paint sale.

"I was out in the wind screen today," he said pointedly, talking across Mrs. Mellon, who was trying to make up her mind over the color chart.

Floyd's eyes connected with his. They were blue, but

like marble rather than seawater. "And . . . ?" asked Arnold hopefully.

"This one," said Mrs. Mellon, pointing to the sunset bronze.

Arnold nodded. "Just be a couple of minutes." He picked up the primaries, poured in a measure of red, and set it in the mixer. He activated the device and returned to Floyd, who was waiting over near the flashlight display. Floyd looked puzzled, and maybe a little scared. Arnold sold two gallons of white primer to Lev Anderson, helped Eddie Miranda choose a color for his porch, went back and got Mrs. Mellon's sunset bronze.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously, when his customers had thinned out. "Did you hear anything?"

"A voice," said Floyd.

"Out in the wind screen?"

"Yes." Cut to the bottom line. "Arnold, I was walking out there, thinking about what you'd said. And I heard it. Plain as day. Whispering in the treetops." The blue eyes peered at him from either side of the long, sharp nose. "I'll never forget it, Arnold."

"What did it say?"

"It was hard to tell at first. I could make out my name, but there was something else, too."

Miranda hadn't left the store yet, and he was showing signs of interest in the conversation. But Arnold didn't care. "Were you able to understand the rest of it?"

"I can tell you what it sounded like."

"What *what* sounded like?" asked Miranda.

"It sounded like . . ." Floyd dropped his voice, and delivered his next words in a conspiratorial tone: ". . . *The Pack will be back.*"

Arnold's spirits sagged. "Excuse me, Floyd." He turned away.

"The Pack will be back." Floyd roared with laughter. "Sure enough, that's what it said."

"What *what* said?" demanded Miranda.

"Arnold's voice. Arnold says there's an invisible thing out in the wind screen that predicts football scores." Floyd's grin was as wide as the Red River.

Miranda laughed. When it was over, Arnold was left staring out across Bannister Avenue. His cheeks were enflamed. Arnold always thought of himself as an even-tempered man, and it was a fair assessment. On that day, however, he wondered half-seriously whether he might find a good hit man somewhere this side of Fargo.

At five o'clock, he closed up. And very deliberately ignored his jogging ritual. He changed into casual clothes, got into his car, drove out to the expressway, and turned north toward Canada. The wind screen, on his right, passed quickly and receded. When he reached the border, five miles north of Fort Moxie, it had become an insignificant green feature on the endless prairie.

He had dinner in Winnipeg, and went to a movie. But he kept rerunning his conversations with the Traveler, things said and not said, and wondered what it made of his absence. Was it sorry for the way it had treated him? Did it care that he had not come back?

The return ride was long and desolate, sixty-five miles through empty country, broken only by a couple of prai-

rie towns. The night was clear, and a round, luminous moon lit the sky.

A sense of his own seclusion washed over him. And that seemed strange, because no one in town had more friends than he. People were always inviting him to their homes. And there had never been a Christmas during which he had eaten alone. Birthday cards flowed in like clockwork every year. On Saturday nights, he had the Elks. And he was a regular at Clint's and the Prairie Schooner. Everybody in Fort Moxie knew Arnold Whitaker. What more could anyone want?

Arnold, why do you travel relentlessly around the outer boundary of so lonely a place?

* * *

Why, indeed?

Next day, toward the end of the afternoon, Arnold went through his meager library and extracted two Civil War novels, Brice's *History of the Ancient World* (which was left over from his single year at UND), and an anthology of mystery fiction. He wrapped them in a supermarket bag, descended to the store, and helped close out. They had a couple of late customers: Harry Sills, who was looking for a match for a three-eighths-inch hex screw; and Walter Koss, Walter seldom bought anything, but he loved to browse through hardware.

It was consequently later than usual when Arnold changed into his jogging gear. He selected his favorite sweat suit, white with red trim, an outfit in which he looked particularly athletic. For the second time, he varied from his usual routine by leaving the car in the garage. Instead, he walked briskly west on Bannister, hauling his bag of books with him.

She was *there*. She was back on the center bench, the one directly in front of the portico. This time, he didn't even notice whether anyone else was on the grounds: he saw no one but her. The worn briefcase lay by her side. The book was open in her hands.

He walked casually along the concrete arc, ostensibly looking toward the Greek columns, but actually watching for some sign that she had noticed him. Her eyes never left the printed page.

He strolled to within a few feet of her, and imagined that he could feel a wave of heat from the woman. He turned toward the colonnade with a sigh, mounted the steps, and walked inside.

Jean DiLullo was on duty. Jean was friendly in a detached sort of way. She wore narrow frame glasses over her dark eyes, and tended to speak with hushed authority, in the manner of a person who has got a firm hold of the Truth. Her world was intelligible, open to investigation, and well-organized within the bounds of the Dewey Decimal System.

Arnold set his package on the counter while she finished checking out the books of two adolescent boys. She smiled at him, and pried her stamp with energy. "Good to see you, Arnold," she said.

Arnold nodded and returned the greeting. He took the books out of the bag. "I wanted to donate these."

"Well, thank you." She took a form from beneath the counter, wrote 'FOUR HARDCOVERS' on it, and pushed

it across to him. "For the IRS," she said. "You fill in the value."

"Okay." He asked how things were going, how her nephew Pete was making out at UND. And then, conversationally. "Who's the woman out front? I know her from somewhere, and I can't place her."

Jean came around from behind the counter, walked to the main doors, and looked out. "That's the new fourth grade teacher," she said. "Her name's Linda Tollman."

"Name doesn't ring a bell," said Arnold. "But I'm sure I've seen her before."

"Why don't you ask her?" said Jean, striding back to her post.

Nothing could have been further from Arnold's mind. "Yes," he said, casually, "maybe I'll do that."

Her red-gold hair glowed in the sunlight. She wore a white jacket today, over a blue blouse and skirt. As he watched, as he descended the stone steps, watching but not watching, she laid the book down in her lap, and her brow furrowed. Her eyes sought a spot off in the sky, and he felt that he could have stopped directly in front of her and not been seen.

He didn't test the theory, however. He strode quickly by, giving no indication (he thought) that he had noticed her. A child with a balloon bumped into him, giggled, and ran off across the grass. Arnold broke into a trot as he regained Fifth Street, and a few minutes later he was picking his way up the slope toward the wind screen. He felt emotionally weak.

The signs of the Traveler's presence appeared as soon as he entered the trees: warm drafts, unsynchronized movements of bushes and foliage, a gradual intensification of air pressure.

Hello, Arnold.

Arnold blew on his hands, and tried to look as if he were in the wind screen for the express purpose of running, and for nothing else. He increased his pace slightly. "Hello, Traveler."

I missed you yesterday.

"I was tired. Took a break from the routine. I'm not going too fast for you, am I?"

No. It's easier for me this way. The elms and box elders shut off the sky. I thought you might be angry.

"Me? No. Why would I be angry?"

We bad a disagreement.

Arnold's sense of victory was not entirely unmixed with guilt. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think my not being here would upset you." Arnold ran a little faster. "How long have you been alone? If you don't mind my asking."

Since last winter.

"Are you male?"

The term does not apply. At least, not strictly.

"What does that mean?"

It's complicated. I do not fit easily into your categories.

"How do you reproduce?"

You would need detailed instruction. Anyway, I'm uncomfortable talking about it.

"You're shy?" Arnold grinned broadly.

I don't think of myself that way. Pause. Perhaps you'd care to describe your own reproductive method. In a

manner that someone unfamiliar with your anatomy could understand easily?

Arnold grinned. "Okay." He picked up a twig, looked at it, and threw it a few feet away. "Your point." The wood was quiet. He tried to imagine what it might feel like to be completely alone in a strange place. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

You've already done it. Thank you.

Neither spoke for a long time. Arnold, out of breath, had slowed down, and now stopped altogether and sat down on a fallen trunk. "You're welcome. What are you thinking about now?"

How comforting the tree belt feels. At home, the open spaces are very attractive. Here, they are full of danger. So I enjoy bidding from them. Does that make sense?

"Yes." It didn't, but Arnold did not want to sound slow-witted.

It is one of the things we have in common, Arnold.

"I don't think I understand."

You, too, are more comfortable in the wind screen than you are in town. Why is that?

"It's not so."

Of course it's so. Why would you deny it, when it's evident?

"It just happens that I enjoy the view from here." *And the solitude.*

"That too."

My point.

Arnold threw his head back and laughed. "Everybody likes to be alone sometimes. There's nothing unusual about that."

Perhaps you're right.

"Of course I am."

He got up, touched his toes a couple of times, and began to walk.

You know, you're good company, Arnold.

"Thank you."

A wall of air touched him. It felt almost solid. It crowded him, sucked at his clothes, ran up his legs, moved across his throat, pushed his sweatshirt up and exposed his belly. "Cut it out," Arnold said.

Laughter rippled through the trees.

They traveled through the early evening, stopping in groves, looking out across the river.

"When I was a boy, I used to play up here."

Were you alone then?

"No. Never."

Where are the others now?

"Most are married. Busy with their lives. One's dead. In the war. And Floyd."

What about Floyd?

"Nothing. He changed. He was away for a lot of years. Came back to claim his property when his folks died. But he wasn't the same when he came back."

How do you mean?

"Don't know. He was just different."

The intimacy had gone out of your relationship?

"Yes."

But it sounds as if you are no longer close to any of your old friends.

"It's called 'growing up.'" When was the last time they had come up here together, he and Floyd and Susan Halley and Hunt Jacoby and the others? When had they decided the forays into the Black Forest no longer served a purpose, and should stop? They had failed to mark the occasion with appropriate ceremony. And *that* was what pained him, not that they had bolted their cool forest empire, but that there had been no final gathering of the force, no farewell, no appreciation of what it had meant. "And you, Traveler: what drives *you* to come so far?"

Arnold was growing sensitive to the creature's moods, as one reads temperament from a human expression or tone. He could feel its uncertainty, watch the movement of its currents among the leaves matting the forest floor, observe its slow passage through brambles and branches.

I love this world, Arnold. I love to gather its warm atmosphere around me, and to race across oceans before its boisterous storms. To cruise silently over deserts, and to ride its thermal currents up the rock towers in the west. I wish there were a way to share these sensations with you.

"Are you anxious to get home?"

One place is as close to home as another. Maybe none more than Earth.

"I don't understand."

The creature fell silent.

"If you don't mind my asking, was your companion killed near here?"

Yes.

Again, the trees moved.

"Traveler," Arnold asked in a bright tone, "you don't eat, do you?"

No. I collect energy directly.

Long silence. Lapping of waves. Stirring of grass and leaves.

"Will you be okay?"

Yes. The word drew out, expanded, rose, and floated away over the trees. Then, nearby, sharp: *We have visitors.*

Twilight was in its last throes. "Who, Traveler?"

"Who you talking to, Arnold?" Bill Pepperdine's voice. Arnold turned in his direction, and saw him standing beside an elm. Flashlights switched on. Four of them. Mike Kramer was off to the right. And Tom Pratkowski. And, half-hidden behind Pepperdine, Floyd.

"Anybody see a monster here anywhere?" asked Kramer. They laughed.

Pratkowski cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hey, Critter," he sang out. "Welcome to Fort Moxie."

The laughter turned to roars. They howled and clapped one another on the back and staggered around. One of them held out a beer for Arnold. "We have visitors," Pepperdine said. "*Hello, out there.*"

Floyd hung back.

Arnold looked desperately toward the treetops. "Say something, Traveler. Tell them you're here."

They were shouldering one another, and having a good laugh, and shaking their heads, the way people do sometimes when they discover an old friend is no longer bolted down very tight. "Yeah, say something," said Kramer, speaking to a box elder. "Don't just stand there."

The only one not laughing was Floyd.

Arnold's gaze swept across them. Hard to believe: they had been his friends and neighbors for years.

"Arnold," he said, "I'm sorry." He came forward. Kramer was grinning. "It's okay, Arnold. We all have our little quirks."

Arnold walked between them, past Floyd without meeting his eyes, and went back into town the way he had come.

* * *

Next day was a little strange at the Lock 'n' Bolt. People came in, as always. They bought chisels and sandpaper and shelving, as always. But they didn't much ask for help, and their eyes were kind of off-center when they came over to pay up. They looked the other way a lot, and Arnold felt as if he were something of an oddity in his own store.

He considered passing on Clint's at lunchtime, because Floyd would be there, and possibly some of the others. But maybe this was an important moment for him, and he should not allow himself to be frightened off.

Floyd was in a booth toward the rear, with Lem Harkness and Rob Henry, both from the Federal Building.

Max Klinghofer, who owned Clint's, was wiping the lunch counter. When he saw Arnold, he wiped harder. And Arnold felt the heat rising into his face. Floyd was facing away from the door, but someone must have alerted him. He turned around and waved cheerfully. As if nothing had happened. But his face colored.

The place was filled, as it always was at noon. People he had known a long time looked up, nodded, smiled. But there was a distance in some expressions, and nervousness in others. As his gaze passed over each table, its occupants fell silent. Arnold was reminded of those old westerns in which someone notorious strolls into the Lost Lode Saloon.

He picked up a *Herald* and sat down alone at a corner table. Aggie took his order, for a tune and french fries, and Arnold glanced at the newspaper. He literally hid behind it, and Aggie had to ask him to move it when she brought his lunch. "You okay?" she asked, hovering over him.

He liked Aggie. Always had. "Yeah," he said. "I'm fine."

"If you don't mind my asking"—she kept her voice down—"what happened last night?"

He looked at her. What *bad* happened last night? "Hard to explain," he said. "I'm going to have to move."

"You need any help," she said, "I'm here."

And later, as he worked his way through the last of the fries, Floyd appeared beside him. "Listen," he said. "I'm sorry about how things went, but it wasn't my fault." His long, thin face was a mask.

Arnold met his eyes. Floyd looked away. "Forget it."

"I did what I could." He threw his hands helplessly toward the ceiling. "Well, dammit, what do you expect with a story like that?" He stood quivering with anger, as if somehow Arnold had betrayed *him*. Then he turned and stalked out the door.

* * *

Midnight on the western loop of the windscreens.

We should not be meeting like this, Arnold.

His car was parked in the lot behind the bus plant, well out of sight. "Now you're willing to speak. Where were you when I needed you?"

I have no intention of talking to a mob.

"I'm sorry you're bound by all these rules. But the whole town now thinks I'm crazy."

I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't say anything about this.

Arnold shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. "I'm sorry. All right? I made a mistake. But now I'm going to have to move out of here. You know that? I can't possibly stay in Fort Moxie after this."

I think you're overreacting.

"That's easy for you to say."

Listen, Arnold: do you have any idea what would have happened if I'd said hello to that crowd last night?

"Half the town might not think I'm crazy."

They might think worse things of a man who talks to voices in the woods. Voices that talk back.

"Well, whatever," grumbled Arnold, "it's done."

I wasn't sure I'd see you again.

"I thought about staying away. If I get caught here, things will get worse."

I think it would be a mistake to change your pattern.

"There's no one around now, is there?"

No.

"Are you sure? They sneaked up on you pretty good last night."

I was distracted. Long pause. When are you planning to move?

"As soon as I can sell the Lock 'n' Bolt."

Where will you go?

"I don't know. Maybe Fargo."

Where is that?

"About a hundred fifty miles south."

How far is a mile?

Arnold got up and walked to the outer edge of the trees. He could see the river, curving in from the border, and, off in the distance, the border station. He pointed. "Those buildings are about five miles."

Floyd seems close.

Arnold sensed a reproach. "What would you suggest?"

A place further away than just over the curve of the horizon.

"Whatever."

You sound bitter.

"Well, what do you expect? Worst thing that ever happened to me was meeting you. You're right, you know: you shouldn't say a word. Not to anybody."

The branches stirred.

Why did you tell Floyd?

Arnold leaned against a box elder. A single car had just pulled out of the border station, and was starting south on I-29. He watched its headlights for a while. "I knew I shouldn't have said anything. But he was a friend. At least I thought he was. He promised not to let it go any further."

He should have honored his commitment.

"Yes, he damn well should."

That is the tradition, is it not?

"You could say that. You know what I'd like to do: you

and I go over to his house and scare the hell out of him." Arnold was staring at the ground. It was difficult talking to someone you couldn't see. You never knew where to look. "I don't suppose you'd consent to that, would you?"

You're vindictive, Arnold. The wind off the prairie was picking up. Leaves were pouring out of the trees. No, I would not.

"That's what I thought."

It was cooling off, and Arnold was thinking he wouldn't stay long tonight. "Do you feel the cold?"

Not at this level. I'm able to generate internal heat. But at the height of your winter, yes. It is too cold for me.

"This whole business is my own fault."

I'm glad you can see that.

"But I don't know what to do about it."

Forget it. Your townsmen will.

A tractor-trailer rumbled north on the expressway.

"Easy for you to say."

Arnold, does it matter so much to you to be able to prove that I am here?

"Yes. Damn it, it does. I'd like somebody to know I'm not a nut."

Then that somebody should be someone important to you?

"Yes."

All right, then. I will do it.

"You'll talk to someone?"

Yes. The word hung there, in the moonlight.

"I'll bring Floyd up here tomorrow."

No. Not Floyd.

Oh, yes, please. Floyd. Let me rub his nose in the truth. Speak to him the way you spoke to me. Spook him. Send him running out of the tree belt. Is it so much to ask? "I would really like it to be Floyd."

There is a young woman who sits each day in the park at the library.

"Linda Tollman." A sense of unease crept over Arnold.

I don't know. She is quite attractive. By simian standards.

"What of her?"

I will speak to her.

"Are you crazy? I don't know her. What's the point?"

She is important to you. She fulfills your requirement.

"That's not true. I don't even know the woman."

That's my offer.

"You've been spying on me." The sudden realization irritated him.

I happened to be there.

"Sure. And you want me to approach a strange woman, and ask her to go for a walk in the woods, so an invisible thing can talk to her?"

I am not a thing.

"Forget it."

It's your call, Arnold.

"Listen, try to understand the problem here." He went for a reasonable tone. "I've been moderately successful with women during my time." He could never have maintained eye contact with that one. "But you're asking me to pick up a woman I've never met. I'm not good at that. It's not my style. If you don't like Floyd, how about if I

brought up, say, Tom Pratkowski? He was here the other night. A little out of line, then. But he's okay. I like him. He's important to me."

The woman. Nobody else.

* * *

His first customer in the morning was Robert Schilling. Rob was the town's resident model train hobbyist, a retired customs inspector who came by the store occasionally to pick up wire and screws and plaster of Paris. Rob was in his eighties and moved, one might say, with great deliberation. Arnold didn't believe the depleted energy level was a function of his age. Even when Arnold was a boy, Rob had not been the man you would want to lead the escape from a burning theater. But today, he entered the Lock 'n' Bolt in a state of considerable excitement.

He pushed in immediately after Arnold had unlocked the door. "Damnedest thing I ever saw," he said.

Arnold grinned. "What's that?"

"You been over to Floyd's?" Rob's eyes were wide, and he looked thoroughly rattled. Rob never looked upset. Not ever.

"No," he said. "Why?"

"Go see it." He never quite got out of the doorway.

"Go see what?"

"Floyd's house. It's devil's work." He banged out, crossed the street with long, sure strides, and crashed into Ed's Supermarket. Arnold stared after him. It was the only time he'd ever heard Rob deliver any kind of religious sentiment.

There was a fair amount of traffic in the street: people were boiling out of the Downtown Cafe and the Federal Building. Some were pointing, in his general direction. Or toward Fifth Street. Then, the supermarket began to empty. Ep Colley, wearing a long gray woolen sweater twice his size, hurried out of the bank next door to the Lock 'n' Bolt. Maude Everson, the teller, was right behind him. Arnold leaned out the door. "Hey, Maude, what's going on?"

"Something about Floyd being buried." She threw the words over her shoulder and kept walking.

He heard sirens.

Arnold never considered simply leaving the store. Tradition weighed far too heavily. Instead, he called Janet and invited her to come in early ("if you like").

When she arrived, thirty minutes later and out of breath, she looked frightened. "Something really strange happened at Floyd's." But her explanation was too garbled to understand easily, so he left her in mid-sentence and hurried outside. The sirens, by then, had stopped. Cars were moving, but an out-of-uniform Border Patrolman had taken up traffic duty at the Fifth Street intersection, and was letting no one turn in there. Large numbers of people were coming out of the side streets from the south side of town, and were running and walking, collecting into a steady stream that moved past the Jefferson School and flowed north past the Border Patrolman.

Devil's work.

Floyd.

A chill worked its way up Arnold's back. He had complained bitterly to the Traveler about Floyd. Had suggested joint action against him.

But the *wind creature* was not human. Had he forgot that essential point? And spurred it on to commit some terrible atrocity?

He crossed the Jefferson School grounds and joined the small army moving up Fifth Street. Arnold's size prevented his getting a good look until he'd got to within about a block. And then his blood froze. The crowd was thick around Floyd's property, and vehicles cluttered the street, but that wasn't what had drawn his eye: something dark and enormous, some Mesozoic *thing*, had attached itself to the front of the modest frame house. Emergency lights blinked, and a couple of the volunteer firemen were prominent, trying to maintain control in the absence of police. (Fort Moxie had no police. Arnold assumed that a deputy would now be on his way over from Cavalier.)

He got closer, and the Mesozoic thing gradually resolved itself into a mountain of dead leaves. Floyd's once-exquisite front yard was piled high with them. They rose in vast heaps, spilled across the top of his porch, buried the upstairs windows, buried the box elders, buried the driveway and maybe the Nissan. They spilled into the street, and washed across the property on either side.

Arnold looked nervously for Floyd, and was relieved to see him off to one side, gesturing to an EMT. The EMT was there with the rescue unit, all of whom had joined the crowd in gawking at the spectacle. Floyd was alternately jabbing with both hands and throwing his palms out, imploring the skies to open up and drown someone.

Some spectators were pointing off in various other directions, and talking with considerable excitement. They had noticed that, with the exception of Floyd's immediate neighbors, who had suffered by their proximity to his house, every visible lawn, every piece of open ground, including the library and the high school, was immaculate. It appeared that something had swept up every stray leaf within several blocks, and dumped it all on Floyd.

A child came from nowhere, dashed between the rescue workers, and leaped onto one of the mounds. Its mother was right behind it, pulled it out, and dragged it kicking and screaming away.

Someone snickered. The volunteers grinned. The Border Patrol laughed. The people from the Federal Building roared. The crowd hooted. And cheered. It was as if a wave had broken: gales of laughter swept across the crowd. Arnold joined in with a whole heart.

Abruptly, Floyd was standing in front of him, his face squeezed into a brick-red snarl. He pointed a trembling finger at Arnold. "You did this!" he shrieked. And then, to the entire baffled assemblage: "It was Whitaker."

* * *

Linda Tollman was seated on the middle bench when Arnold arrived at a few minutes after five that afternoon. He had traded in his sweat suit for slacks, a tennis shirt, and a yellow sweater that didn't quite fit anymore.

He posted himself about fifteen yards away, on another bench, pretending to read a Russian novel. But his heart pounded, and his juices flowed, and his level of terror mounted. He held onto his book, gripped it with white fingers, as if it were the only thing anchoring him to his secure, predictable existence.

She was the loveliest woman he had ever seen.

He could not make out the title of her book. An empty plastic bag, from which she had been feeding the squirrels (*O, happy beasts!*), lay beside her. She was not reading, but seemed instead to be gazing off into the distance, and Arnold noted with satisfaction that she paid no attention to the admiring glances she drew from all who passed, both male and female.

He tried to catch her eye, to see if he might elicit some faint encouragement. But she never looked his way.

He was going to have to get up and walk over. What would he say?

Hello. My name's Arnold Whitaker. May I join you?

No. He might have tried that when he first arrived. It was too late now. Too much a blatant attempt at a pickup.

He could stroll in her general direction. Casually. Put his hands in his pockets, and pretend to admire the oak tree behind her, or the Greek pillars fronting the library. *Nice columns Doric, aren't they?*

His pulse hammered in his ears. He clung to the arms of the bench.

There was more traffic than normal on Fifth Street, but it was all headed for Floyd's house, to gawk and take pictures. The world never notices the truly significant dramas.

He tried to surprise himself, and threw a quick command to his muscles: *Get up.*

No response.

Go on over. Say hello.

A passing breeze stirred her hair. With an achingly feminine gesture, she brushed it back. He tried to imagine that hand touching his wrist. Holding his cheek while those lambent eyes poured themselves into his own.

Do it.

The breeze lifted Linda Tollman's skirt. And while he sat, desperately aware of the hard surface of his bench, of the individual planks and the spaces between, and of the texture of the paved walkway, she closed her book, got up, brushed her skirt with a graceful left-handed movement, picked up her briefcase, and without (as far as he could tell) ever having seen him, strode off.

* * *

What happened?

The sky smelled of coming rain.

"Forget it. I really do not want to play games with you."

Okay. The sound rolled through the trees, splashed into the water, cut the tops off ripples. It moved among the box elders, pushed dead leaves before it, tugged at his trousers. And finally faded.

"You know I can't bring her up here."

Why not?

Arnold trembled. Here, in this solid American place, on the banks of the Red River, on the edge of Fort Moxie, North Dakota, he was acutely aware of standing at the threshold of another world, looking across the top of a globe-circling forest at multiple moons and strange constellations. "Because she's a stranger. You don't just invite strange women into the woods."

You're not afraid of her, are you, Arnold?

"Of course not."

Then why don't you make the effort?

"Why does it have to be *her*? Why not Aggie? Or Rob Schilling? Or almost anybody else in town?"

The woman on the bench is quite attractive.

"What's that got to do with it?"

I would like to meet her.

"Why?"

As simply as I can state it: I share your appreciation for beautiful things. I would enjoy speaking with her.

"You can't be serious."

Arnold, you've expressed the wish that you and I had never spoken. I can assure you that if she were a jogger, we never would have.

Arnold sighed. "You called us simians. Why would you care about a simian?" He was leaning against a tree at the edge of a glade.

Tell me, are you familiar with the gazelle?

"I know what it looks like."

Would you say that the animal is beautiful?

"It's all right. I can take it or leave it."

Picture the gazelle, with its wide eyes, and its clean, innocent features. Endow it with intelligence. Note that its compassion already exceeds the standard for most humans. Add self-awareness, of the kind that the woman has. Would you not find the creature attractive?

Suspicion had begun to grow in Arnold's heart. "You're not planning some sort of assault, are you?"

Of course not. Arnold, are you thinking sex?

"I don't think so. You're not capable of sex, right?"

The Traveler was slow to respond.

"Are you?"

Not strictly speaking.

Unstrictly speaking.

I am capable of orgasmic response.

Arnold shuddered. "How?"

You have no word. Pause. By engulfing something warm and intelligent and beautiful.

He began to back away. "Engulfing?"

It is not how it sounds. No one is harmed.

"It sounds kinky."

Your term is unfamiliar. But I can guess the meaning. Emotional relations between intelligent species is not unknown, Arnold.

"It still sounds unnatural to me."

It's not even rare.

Raped by a wind storm.

Stop thinking sex, Arnold. We are beyond that. We are speaking of a bigger emotion.

"Love?"

Perhaps.

Love is a temporary chemical imbalance.

Others would define it differently.

How would you define it?

As a sublime appreciation for the noblest qualities in a fellow creature. Affection ignited by passion. In the bigger beings, it is accompanied by an obsession for its object's welfare.

"I'm not going to deliver Linda Tollman to you. The whole idea's obscene."

You don't trust me. It sounded genuinely offended. I would never harm anyone.

"Ha," said Arnold. "Look what you did to poor Floyd." *Floyd's an exception. And you feel sorry for him now, right?*

"I didn't say that. Anyway, she won't come. Even if I wanted her to, she wouldn't come."

Again, a restless movement in the trees. *Certainly not, if you insist on sitting there all afternoon until she gets up and leaves. Did you think she would walk over and invite you to go for a walk by the river's edge?*

Arnold felt his cheeks redden. "You were *there* today, weren't you? You didn't tell me you'd be there."

The grass rippled.

"I want you to stay away."

As you like.

* * *

Arnold understood Linda Tollman's inclination, while the weather held, to visit the park each afternoon. Fort Moxie's winters were long and bitter; one did not waste sun-filled days, particularly in September, when so few remained.

It was cooler today. The sun was hidden by a swirl of gray clouds.

This time, he instructed himself as he approached along the paving, walk right up to her. Say hello as casually as you can, and sit down. (He had hoped the other benches would all have occupants, but he could see immediately after coming off the parking lot that there was plenty of room for him elsewhere.)

His mouth went dry. He could feel his pulse picking up.

She had propped her book in her lap and seemed to be focused on it. Several children played unnoticed on the lawn behind her. She wore blue slacks, a white blouse and sweater. An oversized multicolored scarf had been tossed across one shoulder. Arnold wondered what it would be like to have such a creature in his life. He suspected there must be a husband or boyfriend lingering somewhere.

He summoned all his courage and stopped in front of her. Actually *stopped*. He pretended to look at the box elder behind her, hoping to suggest appreciation for its subtle beauty. Meantime, he strained his peripheral vision for some sign of response from her.

She turned a page.

"Lovely day," he said, in a strangled voice.

Dumb. Couldn't he do better than that?

Her eyes touched him. They were vividly, electrically green. Brilliant, luminous eyes that could have swallowed him. "Yes," she said, in a neutral, uninterested voice, "it is." And that magnificent gaze slid off over his right shoulder and locked again on that *goddam* book.

Our Mutual Friend, he noted. Dickens.

An icy chill expanded in Arnold's stomach. *This is not going to work. I noticed you here yesterday.*

She nodded without looking up.

Arnold did a kind of mental countdown from six and, on zero, took the plunge: "Do you mind if I join you?" His lungs weren't working right, his voice had gone to a higher register, and he mumbled the last two words. Maybe mumbled all of it.

"Of course," she said, with an inflection that neither

invited nor rebuked. She moved over to make room. Plenty of room.

"Do you come here often?"

She continued to study the page. "Only to read."

A terrible silence settled over the park. Three adolescent girls came out of the library entrance. They were laughing in the conspiratorial manner of females everywhere. He sat at his end of the bench, pushed against the planks, felt the heat rise in his face. He was trying desperately to think of something else to say.

Would you like to join me for dinner? We could discuss Dickens.

How about a walk down by the river?

"How's the book?"

She was about halfway through. "Quite good," she answered brightly. She looked at him again, and he felt opportunity beckon. What next? He could only think of the pain that would come with being sneered at by this lovely creature. And of the certainty that she would respond to any initiative in just that way. She sat resplendent in late afternoon sunlight, end-of-the-day sunlight, dazzling against the fading, pedestrian world around her. How often, he wondered, had the Traveler floated invisible beside her?

Was it there now? (He didn't necessarily take the visitor at its word.)

She seemed suddenly to recall something she'd forgotten. She held up one slim wrist to glance at her watch, and frowned. "I didn't realize it was so late," she said. She rose, and, without another word, snatched up her bag and strode off into the deepening evening.

* * *

He was too embarrassed to go back to the wind screen. The prospect of trying to explain himself to the Traveler was painful. Damn the thing anyway. Arnold sat up late that night, watching TV, reading a technothriller, unable to concentrate on either. Linda Tollman filled his mind. And the Grand Forks weatherman predicted high winds and unseasonable rain.

It started in the early morning. By the time he went downstairs to open up, a fifty-five-mile-an-hour gale had developed. It rattled the old building which housed the Lock 'n' Bolt, and drove everyone off the streets.

Arnold tended an empty store. He put some tape on the windows as a precaution, and set up a portable TV in back of the cash register, to follow the weather reports. Grand Forks thought conditions would abate shortly after midday. Meantime, high winds were sweeping the prairie from northern Manitoba into South Dakota.

They were doing some damage. They blew over Curt Gaarstad's garage and knocked out a few windows and picked up the bright new metal sign over Ed's Supermarket and lost it. Nobody ever saw it again. They also caught a shipment of shingles and roofing material down at the lumber yard and scattered it around town. The remainder of the dead leaves deposited at Floyd's (about half had been trucked away) went south, and they too vanished out over the prairie.

The wind blew throughout the early morning. It banged and clattered and hammered at the store, but Arnold felt safe because he'd been through similar storms countless

times before. Light rain fell occasionally, the drops driven before the gusts, and smeared across Arnold's windows.

Janet called around ten to explain that they'd lost a storm door, and that she would be late. Arnold suggested she stay home until the weather settled. "Nothing happening here anyway."

He looked out at the deserted street and fretted for the Traveler. The few trees along Bannister Avenue heaved and writhed.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. At a quarter to eleven he broke with custom, with his own iron law, and locked up. He got his car out of the garage, drove to Fifth Street, and turned right. No other traffic was moving.

He pulled as close to the wind screen as he could get, and climbed out. The wind knocked him over, took his breath away. He struggled upslope, into the trees. They provided no shelter whatever. He cupped his hands around his mouth and tried to shout over the incessant roar.

"Traveler."

But it was hopeless. Twigs, pebbles, debris pelted him. He struggled back to the jogging path and tried again.

In the distance, he could see more rain coming.

"Traveler."

The storm howled.

And after a short time, while sheets of rain sliced like knives through the wind screen, Arnold retreated, cold, drenched, breathless, to his car.

* * *

He spent a long, dreary, frightening day. He was uncertain about the capabilities of the visitor, or its limitations. But he feared the worst. Heavy rains washed down after the winds had subsided. They beat steadily against the windows over at Clint's, while Arnold poked at a hamburger and french fries. He stayed in the restaurant, ordering coffee, and then beer, preferring human company tonight. And on this evening, most especially, he resented the Traveler. *I may have lost you, and there is not even anyone with whom I can talk.*

It was still raining steadily when he crossed back to the hardware store, and went up to his apartment to wait out the storm. The ten o'clock news reported it had already ended, but Arnold saw no change until well after midnight. Then, while the night grew suddenly still, he went back once more to the wind screen.

Hello, Arnold. The voice reached out to him while he was still on the slope.

"Traveler, are you okay?"

Yes.

"Where were you yesterday? I couldn't find you."

I was right here.

"Why didn't you answer me?"

Laughter rippled through the wet trees. Too much competition. *The voice of the storm was far louder than mine. But I was moved by your concern.*

Arnold would have liked to clasp the creature, to pound its shoulder, shake its hand. "I wish I could touch you," he said.

A warm current flowed around him. You have.

The ground was soggy. There was no dry place to sit. "I just wanted to be sure you were all right."

I'm fine.

Arnold was still only at the edge of the trees. His shoes and trousers were soaked from the high grass. "I'm going home. I'll see you tomorrow."

What about the woman?

"It didn't work out."

Couldn't you have done more with the book? That was your wedge, Arnold.

"I did the best I could."

Sometimes you behave as if you've lived most of your life in another world.

The Traveler seemed bigger somehow. As if it had absorbed river and trees. And the town, and even the endless plain beyond. "Look," he said, "the only way I could get her to come here with me would be at gunpoint."

You underrate yourself. You are in fact quite handsome, except when you're trying to make an impression. Or when you're frightened.

"That's not what I mean," he said defensively.

You should try again.

"I've had enough."

You need to stand up straight. You slouch when you're under pressure. Look her right in the eye. Go after the book. That's your key.

"I can't do any of this. You're asking me to change the habits of a lifetime."

It might help if you gave up the rumpled look. Get your trousers pressed. Maybe invest in a suede jacket. Get rid of the baggy sweater.

"I like this sweater. I've had it a long time."

I know.

"Do you have any idea what a suede jacket costs?"

Wouldn't she be worth it?

"No. I'm not going back there. She walked off and left me sitting on the bench. She has no interest in me."

All right, Arnold. This time, I'll help you.

"What do you mean?"

I can move warm air. Stimulate her. She will find you very attractive.

"You wouldn't do that." Arnold was horrified. "What are you thinking of?"

* * *

His night was filled with visions of Linda Tollman. He threw damp sheets off, stared listlessly into the dark abyss over his bed, and listened to the elements play against the side of the house. Where was the Traveler now? Was it perhaps influencing him in some darkly subtle way, as it claimed it could influence the woman? The creature seemed so amiable, he was inclined to overlook how devious it could be.

But there was the delicious possibility that it really could stir Linda Tollman's emotions. Would he accept her on such terms? He tried to imagine those eyes smoldering with passion for him, those lips pressed against his.

The fix is in.

He played and replayed his conversation with her, inserting variations, clever phrases; employing a casual, self-assured smile. She returns the smile and takes his hand. *I've been waiting a lifetime for you, Arnold. She is so close he can hear her heartbeat.*

He nods. *And I, for you.*
She is only a gazelle.

It was still raining Saturday morning. He turned the Lock 'n' Bolt over to Janet and Dean for the day and headed south.

I-29 between the border and Grand Forks is a long, straight, unremarkable run of eighty miles. The countryside is flat and featureless, broken only by the city of Drayton, with its smokestack, at the halfway mark. The pavement steamed, and the gray sky literally sagged into the prairie.

Arnold arrived at about eleven, treated himself to a big lunch at the Village Inn, and headed for the mall. He was an impatient shopper, and by two o'clock had bought two pairs of jeans, a few sport shirts, and a pair of shoes. And a suede jacket. The jacket was tan, perhaps a trifle conservative for Arnold's taste, but the saleslady admired it, and it *did* seem to possess a stylish flair. It cost three hundred dollars.

He splashed back into Fort Moxie, impulsively turned north on Fifth Street, past Floyd's, and cruised by the library. The rain had turned to a light drizzle.

Lights were on in the Greek temple. A couple of kids stood talking in the colonnade. The bench that Linda Tollman favored seemed to have attracted a yellow nimbus.

* * *

He spent the weekend reading *Our Mutual Friend*. He read over meals, read through long afternoons, read deep into the night. All other projects went on hold. He wasn't doing it simply for her, he told himself, but because it was a book he *should* read.

He assumed she would not go to the park over the weekend, but the point was rendered moot by the weather, which remained cold and dreary. It was now late enough in the season that there might be no more pleasant days, in which case he would have no choice but to call her. Or forget her. (She was not in the phone book, but Information had a listing for her.) That approach would of course require him to state his intentions directly. It was not a technique which meshed well with Arnold's style, which was more suited to holding the fort than organizing a sally.

In the late afternoons, he trekked through the dismal weather up to the wind screen, and huddled cold and wet beneath an elm that provided purely symbolic shelter. And he and the Traveler talked.

Arnold grumbled about his task, but the Traveler refused to entertain his objections. It talked instead about the sculpting of particularly interesting peaks in the Canadian Rockies. And about the clash of air currents near some coastal areas. (The thing was unclear about *which* coastal areas.) And it commented unfavorably on the planet's deteriorating atmosphere.

Unbalanced. I would say there are too many people.

"I assume," said Arnold, "that it's a phase most cultures pass through."

Think of it more as an intelligence test. Most species have a good record of taking care of their worlds. It's common among simian-types, though.

They talked about nuclear weapons:

Very few species have seen any point in building them.

And about organized religions:

Usually limited to primitive cultures.

You can't be serious."

The only species I know of that retained a religious structure beyond primal development is the Kuanaamali.

"I'm glad to hear that someone out there is acting responsibly."

The Kuanaamali also have a fixation with breast-feeding.

"What?"

Just kidding.

And about Linda Tollman:

I'd really like not to do this..

Arnold, do it for me.

"I can't believe you really care. You're just insisting on this to embarrass me."

No. It's not true. Do you want the truth?

"That would be a good idea."

I have already tried to speak with her. There is an etm outside her apartment. But it is too limited.

"Why?"

Because she is an exquisite creature. I wish only that she should know I exist. And that I admire her.

"You're kidding."

Late Sunday, when he was shivering in the damp cold and getting ready to leave for the day, Arnold asked, suddenly, "When the time comes to go home, will you have any warning?"

What do you mean?

"Will there be a chance to say goodbye? Or will you just not be here one night?"

I'm not sure, Arnold. Does it matter?

"I suppose not."

* * *

The skies did not clear until Tuesday morning. The sun came out about noon, and the streets dried up. At a little after four o'clock, Arnold, wearing his tan suede blazer, rolled into the library parking lot. A burst of wind rocked his car. When he stepped onto the gravel, it pulled at his clothes, rearranged his hair. "You're here, aren't you?" he said, looking from side to side, as if the Traveler might materialize. He kept his voice down. There were people in the lot, kids with books, an impatient-looking young man behind the steering wheel of a Ford pickup, a group of children throwing a ball around.

The wind moved against him in a seductive manner. "Hey," he whispered. "Her. Not me."

Ripples raced across the grass.

Linda Tollman, dressed today in crisp green, with a gold jacket, was coming. She crossed the intersection at Fifth and Gunther, walking with long, confident strides. She paused for a passing pickup, and came on again.

Teenagers occupied most of the benches. Only one, down near the cavalryman statue, was empty. She crossed toward it, sat down, opened her briefcase, took out the book, and looked around. *Looked around.* For him, possibly? He was still on the lot, not easily visible.

She started to read.

The park and the people coming and going with their hands filled with books, and the neat little frame houses lining Gunther Street, and the bottomless blue sky, all served as backdrop for her. The world was centered on the bench and the green-eyed woman.

Arnold's breathing was uneven.

Linda had to have other men in her life. Hunks, probably. What chance did he have?

And she would be annoyed to see that he was still pestering her.

Walk away. Go home. Forget it.

And pay the coward's price. As he always had.

Warm air flowed across him. The traveler.

He stepped out onto the pavement and started in her direction. Keep hands loose at sides. Try to look self-assured.

Don't stoop.

She glanced his way, appeared not to recognize him. He drew closer, slowing, determined to stay with his strategy. He strolled past her, stopped as if he'd just noticed something. "Isn't that *Our Mutual Friend*?" He spoke slowly, deliberately, forcing his voice into a low register, striving to hold down the panic that was rising on all sides.

"Why, yes," she said. She looked at him again. Her brow furrowed. He saw recognition ignite in that green gaze. Felt a soft warm breeze move at his side. "Have you read it?"

"Of course." He tried to smile casually. But his lips and mouth felt tight. "A long time ago. I've never forgotten it." Encouraged, he took a step toward her.

She was using a cereal coupon as a bookmark. She inserted it in her page, but did not close the book. "It is a fine novel. One of his best."

"I agree. It's unforgettable." That had a ring of repetition about it, but it was too late now.

"I love Dickens," she said.

"So do I."

"What was it you found particularly memorable?"

That was easy. "Bella Wilfer," he said. "I think I fell in love with Bella Wilfer." That sounded a bit daring.

And she smiled at him. The day grew warm. Hormones poured into his blood.

She made room, without being asked this time. And they talked about Mr. Boffin and Silas Wegg and the evils of arranged marriages. She was near the climax, and expected to finish the novel that evening. (Did that mean there was after all no male dominating her time?) "Don't tell me how it ends," she said. And then, disconcertingly: "What else have you read by him?"

What indeed?

A light autumn breeze scattered leaves across the grass.

What Dickens movies had he seen? What summaries out of *Cliffs Notes* could he remember? He'd started to watch *Nicholas Nickleby* on TV recently, but he'd got bored and switched to a cop show. *Great Expectations* had a convict and a kid.

He felt her eyes on him, felt it all slipping away. He was about to try his luck with the convict when he saw the obvious escape: "Scrooge," he said. "The *Christmas*

Carol. Despite all the times I've read it, and seen it, it still just blows me away."

"Marley was dead." There was a wisp of disapproval in her remark, but whether of his choice, or his use of the vernacular, or something that had escaped his notice, he didn't know. Possibly she had hoped for something a little more exotic. *Edmund Drossard* maybe, the one Dickens hadn't finished. But what, other than the fact of its incompleteness, did Arnold know about *Edmund Drossard*?

They talked at length about the author and his work, a dialogue that consisted of pointed remarks by Linda, and fully realized generalizations by Arnold, coupled with strategic nods and affirmatives. At his earliest opportunity, he switched the conversation into a safer channel.

Linda (they were by now on a first-name basis) described her work as a fourth grade teacher, and Arnold mentioned that he owned the Lock 'n' Bolt. They talked about the state of American education and the failure of government at every level to support the schools, and Arnold commented on the condition of the economy, and how lucky they were in Fort Moxie to be able to attract good teachers. "It's a safe town," he said. "Temperature runs between ten and forty below most of the winter. No gangs hanging around, I'll tell you."

She openly admired his suede jacket, and he good-humoredly held out the sleeve for her to touch.

Shadows lengthened, the temperature fell, and Linda Tollman rubbed her hands together and announced that it had grown late, and she had to go.

Arnold, realizing the moment of truth had arrived, threw caution to the wind. "Can I persuade you to have dinner with me?"

She got to her feet, and appraised him with no attempt at concealment. "Tonight?"

"If you're available."

"Yes," she said. "I'm available."

* * *

The Depot, over in Minnesota on Route 75, was *de rigueur* for food and romance. It featured soft music, dark corners, a fireplace, and flickering candles in red wine bottles. Prices were moderately high, but on this night that was not a consideration.

They ordered chablis, and Linda Tollman shrugged out of her jacket. She was new to Fort Moxie, having moved up from Fargo, she explained, to take the fourth grade job at Thomas Jefferson School. She enjoyed the work. Loved the work. And Arnold began to sense that he had a clear field.

"We're not usually so lucky," he said, riding his crest. "Remote place like this, people are more inclined to move out than in."

She smiled at him across the rim of her glass. "You're wondering why I came here."

"Yes. I'm curious. If you don't mind."

"No." Nonetheless, she seemed hesitant. "Not at all. The school gives me a lot of freedom. I like to read to the kids, and I like to be able to choose what I read."

"You couldn't do that in Fargo?"

"Within limits." A shadow, a momentary regret, passed over her face. She had left *something* behind.

She asked questions about his life, about the history of the tiny border town, and about his interest in Charles Dickens. How had *that* happened? And something in her features suggested that his game lay exposed. That she *knew*, and that she thought no less of him for it. She seemed, in fact, amused.

The evening *flowed*. They ordered T-bones and a second round of chablis. Candles glittered in her eyes and in the wine. She had fine white teeth, and the shifting light created shadows at her jawline and the base of her throat.

"I grew up in Bismarck," she said.

"How did you get to Fargo?"

"I wanted to change my zip code." She sounded quite serious.

"Get away from the family?"

"That too."

Outside, it was almost dark. The plains rolled undisturbed around the curve of the Earth. There were a few other patrons in the Depot, scattered among its wooden tables, whispering in the flickering light. (Everyone used hushed tones here.)

"How do you like Fort Moxie so far?"

"It's very nice," she said. "There aren't many distractions." And her gaze bent inward. "It almost forces you to ask yourself what really counts."

He buttered a roll, drank some of his coffee. "And what does really count?"

Her eyes met his. "Aside from my students? I don't know. I'm still working on that." Her lips curved into a smile. "I know what doesn't. It's not piling up credit hours. Or worrying about the future. Or giving way to regrets." Her fingers curved exquisitely around the glass.

Arnold watched her through the flickering light. "What counts to me," he said gallantly, "is an evening like this." Breathless with his newfound courage, he reached across the table and covered her hand with his own. It was the first time he had felt her flesh against his. His internal tides rolled. "In the end, it's all that matters."

Their eyes locked, and Arnold realized that, no matter how things fell out, his life would never be the same.

But a lovesick Traveler lay ahead. *There's someone I'd like you to meet.*

"Do you run?" he asked.

"Only when I'm being chased." She laughed, sliced a strip off her steak, and slid it between her lips. "But you do, of course?"

"Yes," he said. "There's a jogging path through the wind screen. It goes past the river. On a night like this, it's lovely." And a little unusual.

Her eyes filled with amusement. "You want to walk out there? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"You would enjoy it," he said.

* * *

A brisk wind blew off the river. The treetops masked a three-quarter moon. He was supremely conscious of Linda's physical presence as they walked.

The night was bright and clear, a magnificent evening to stroll with a beautiful woman at the edge of the Red. But the Traveler was nearby. He felt its presence. When it *speaks*, it cannot help but frighten her. And, whatever

else happens, she will eventually conclude that Arnold was part of the plot. What was he doing up here anyway?

He glanced over at her.

"An evening full of starlight," she said. "This was a good idea."

The wind moved.

"Maybe we should get back to the car," he said.

"Are you cold?"

The river gurgled, and something nearby splashed. Beyond the trees, toward town, a dog barked. Music from a distant stereo penetrated the stillness. "No," he said. And could think of nothing to explain his remark.

He felt it advance through the night, felt the wind rise, watched the moon dance on the river. Linda walked beside him, warm and luminous. Her hips brushed his, her fingers clung to his hand. "It is so dark out here," she said, letting go and opening her arms to the night. She turned to face him. Her lips were wet in the moonlight, and she caught him in that emerald gaze.

Years from now, when the Traveler would be long gone, Arnold wanted desperately that there should be someone with whom he could share the experience. And maybe the loss.

But it should be Floyd. Or Mike Kramer. Or Aggie.

She was in his arms. Her acquiescence, the pliability of her shoulders, electrified him. And she kissed him. Hit and run: he felt the brief press of her lips, and she was gone before he knew it had happened.

"You're probably right, Arnold. Why don't we call it a night?"

He nodded.

The moonlight changed. Darkened.

The trees stirred.

"No," he said, speaking to the Traveler.

Linda looked curiously at him. "You sure you're all right?" She delivered a mischievous smile, suggesting that she knew her kiss had been dynamite, and that if he was all right unsettled by it, she understood.

No. Stay away.

He put an arm around her. And stood, waiting.

"Yes," said Arnold, "maybe we should start back." He'd brought her. If the Traveler was slow to respond, that wasn't *his* fault.

He tried to hurry her, without betraying his intention. Or his nervousness. Pebbles crunched underfoot, and he made small talk, how he had been jogging here for years, how good the fishing used to be.

But the darkness along the edge of the river was complete. And in his haste, he lost his footing, got tangled in *something*. He never saw what it was, a bramble, a rock, a root. But he went sprawling, and heard a sharp crack like breaking wood. A stab of pure agony raced up one leg.

Linda was beside him immediately. "Lie still," she said. "What is it?"

"Ankle." He was mortified. And frightened.

Carefully, she untied his shoe, took it off. It *burt*.

"It's broken." She shook her head and smiled down at him. "I'll need the car keys."

"Why?"

She was removing her jacket, placing it over him. "So we can get you out of here. I'm going to need some help."

He fished in his pocket, held them up for her. "That was dumb," he said.

She took them, bent over, raised his head, and kissed him. This time she went long and deep, and her hair rested against his cheek, and her hand grasped the nape of his neck. "Stay put, Scout," she said, with a wink. "I'll be back as quick as I can."

"Wait," he said.

But she was gone. And the wind sighed in the trees.

He made one effort to get up, thought better of it, and lay back. Damn.

Arnold.

He closed his eyes. "Hello, Traveler."

Are you hurt?

I'll survive.

I had no idea you were so clumsy.

This is your fault.

Possibly.

"You want to tell me now what all the fuss was about? When the crunch came, you were just as scared of her as I was."

It laughed. *Arnold, you sound annoyed.*

"My ankle's broken, damn it. You'd sound annoyed too. You want to answer my question?"

Sure. I like you, Arnold. The voice came out of the trees and off the river. It was softening. Changing. *I'll miss you.*

Arnold propped himself on his elbows. "You're not leaving, are you?"

Yes.

"Have they come for you? Your friends?"

Not yet.

"Then why are you leaving?"

Because I am becoming too attached to you.

"To me? I thought you were caught up with Linda." He wondered whether he sounded sulky.

It is you, Arnold. It was always you. The voice seemed very close.

"You're kidding."

How could you not know? A sudden gale shook the trees. But at ground level, the night was calm. A breeze touched him. *I have enjoyed our time together.*

Arnold heard a car start. And drive off.

"When are you leaving?"

Tonight.

"Don't." Arnold thought how empty the wind screen would be without its eerie inhabitant. "Stay a little longer. There's no hurry."

Its laughter echoed around him. But it was soft. And gentle. *It's not as if you're going to be able to come back up here for a while.*

Arnold glanced down at his ankle. "Where will you go?"

I haven't decided yet.

"What about Linda? Why did you want me to drag her out here? Really?"

You don't know?

"I have no idea."

I'm disappointed.

Arnold waited.

I wanted to believe you would miss me. And I wanted to ease the pain of separation. Air currents flowed, grew cooler. It withdrew from him. Something long, and lithe, moved against the moon. *Perhaps I was wrong.* A mist, illuminated by starlight, or possibly from within, floated just above the river. It was graceful and sinuous, and, as he watched, it rose into a living fountain. It swirled away across the dark water, driven by a sudden burst of wind, and reformed on the opposite shore.

"Traveler," he said, "don't leave." He tried to get up, but the pain in his ankle pierced him again and he cried out. Like Linda, it came to him swiftly. The lights eddied around him, and closed in an ethereal embrace. In that moment, on the shoreline, among the narrow screen of box elders and bushes, its sweet warm breath played over him, and it clung to him.

She clung to him. Arnold assigned it a gender.

I will not forget you, he said.

Nor I you.

Will you come back?

The wind moved around him. *It's unlikely, Arnold.*

Ships in the night.

Please explain.

"People who meet, become emotionally entangled, and pass on."

I would like to think we have done better.

Cars were coming. Brakes screeched, doors slammed. He heard a siren in the distance.

Traveler—

Yes?

"Thanks."

You, too. The air pressure began to lessen. One other thing you should know. You succeeded with Linda Tollman on your own. I did not intervene. He felt her withdraw, felt the warm currents turn cool. Felt the pain return to his ankle.

Traveler?

He did not know whether she could hear him any longer.

I love you.

The trees swayed. Along the path, he could see the lights of the rescue party.

* * *

By the end of the week, a wind chime had appeared outside Arnold's bedroom window. It was a magnificent wind chime, whose flight of pewter eagles collided musically with each other and with an ivy-encrusted pewter arch. Late-evening strollers along Bannister Avenue often paused to listen to the exquisite notes blown across the rooftops.

Years later, when Arnold and his family moved from Fort Moxie to open a hardware discount house in Fargo, he took the wind chime with him. ♦



Back Issues and Anthologies

If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING® Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1970s, plus almost every magazine from May 1990 through September 1993, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

The list also includes six paperback anthologies that were produced by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, reprinting many classic stories from older issues—a great way to pick up a representative collection of what was being printed in the good old days. Also available is another anthology, *Cinemonsters*, which is described in detail on the following page.

All of the anthologies and most of the magazines are in mint condition. Among the copies of any single back issue, the magazines in mint condition are sold first. Every publication has a money-back guarantee—if you aren't satisfied with what you get, send back the merchandise you don't want and we'll reimburse you for the price of the item(s) plus the return postage.

Prices of the digest-sized magazines vary according to age, with the older issues costing less than the newer ones (because the cover price of the older magazines was lower).

After you've totaled the prices for the old magazines you want, add on a postage charge of \$1.00 for the first issue and 50¢ for each additional issue through the tenth one. If you order more than ten digest-sized magazines, you don't pay any additional postage charge.

Full-sized issues, beginning with May 1991, are priced at a flat rate of \$5.00 each, which includes postage. (Prices for the anthologies also have postage costs built in.)

To make an order, write out clearly and legibly the magazines you want, calculate the total cost, and enclose a check or money order for that amount. Send your order to the magazine's business office (P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147). All orders will be shipped via third-class mail or UPS within two days of receipt.

If we can't fill your order because of sold-out issues, we'll reserve for you the issues we can sell you; then we'll send back your check or money order and ask you to send us exact payment for the items we can provide for you.

As an option, you can ask to receive one or more of the anthologies as a replacement for back issues that might be sold out. If you like this idea, just tell us the anthologies you'd like to have, in order of preference, and we'll make sure that you get your money's worth.

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The Ascending Aye by Gordon Eklund, *Night Shift* by George R. R. Martin, *On Ice* by Barry N. Malzberg, *Close Your Eyes and Stare at Your Memories* by A. G. Moran

August 1973 43 copies

To Walk With Thunder by Dean McLaughlin, *The Once and Always War* by Gerard F. Conway, *Up Against the Wall* by Robert Thurston

— \$1.50 each —

November 1978 9 copies

While the North Wind Blows by Christopher Anvil, *Green ThUMB* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Last Rocket from Newark* by Jack C. Haldeman II

— \$1.75 each —

May 1990: *Giant, Giant Steps* by Robert Frazier, *Computer Portrait* by Joyce Carr, *Fatal Disk Error* by Genie Alec Elfinger

July 1990: *HARVEST* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, *The Secret of Life* by David Brin, *Sequoia Dreams* by Sheila Finch

September 1990: *Harlem Nova* by Paul Di Filippo, *At Vega's Taqueria* by Richard A. Lupoff, *Whoso List to Hunt* by Susan Shwartz

November 1990: When the Ship Comes In by R. Garcia y Robertson, Command Performance by Kathie Kora; Behind the Eyes of Dreamers by Pamela Sargent

January 1991: Stranger Suns (Part One) by George Zebrowski, A Painting Lesson by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Life in a Drop of Pond Water by Bruce Bethke

March 1991: Dog's Life by Martha Soukup, The Dragon of Aller by John Brunner, Stranger Suns (Conclusion) by George Zebrowski

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July 1991: Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life by John Morressy; Arms and the Woman by James Morrow; The Perfect Hero by Elizabeth Moon

August 1991: Fantasies by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan, The Number of the Sand by George Zebrowski, The Face of the Waters by Robert Silverberg

September 1991: Death Link by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor, The Storming Bone by Ian McDowell; Thomas and the Wise Men by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

October 1991: Skin Deep by Brian Stableford, The Drifter by Lawrence Watt-Evans; Line Run on a Dead Grant by Jack C. Haldeman II

November 1991: LIMITED SUPPLY The Implanted Man by F. M. Busby, The Year of the Guns—Part Two by Rick Shelley

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February 1992: Complications by Brian Stableford; In Brass Valley by Avram Davidson, If There Be Cause by Sheila Finch, The Final Page by Phillip C. Jennings

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April 1992: Missing Person by William F. Wu, Life in the Air by Barry N. Malberg and Jack Dann, Isabella of Castile Answers Her Mail by James Morrow

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